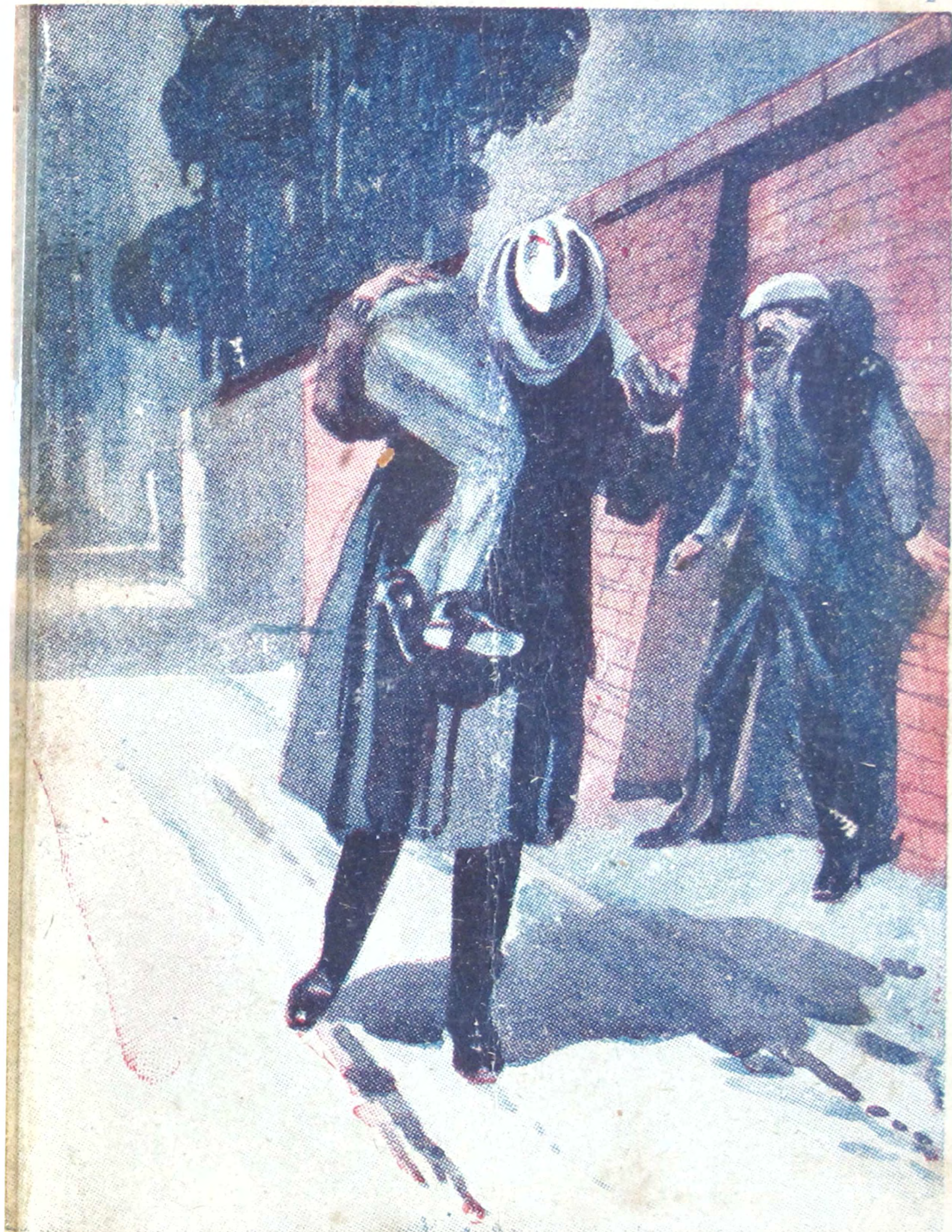


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WHO KILLED THE COLONEL?

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Soldier Housemaster," "Discipline Let Loose," "Dr. Stafford's Ordeal," etc.

February 8, 1919

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

TRAGEDY AT ST. FRANK'S.

ST. FRANK'S was stunned. The terrible tragedy which had occurred during the night had shocked boys and masters enormously. Colonel Howard Clinton, the former Housemaster of the College House, had been found in his study—murdered!

The colonel had not been popular with his boys; quite the reverse, in fact. His ideas of discipline had been harsh and preposterous. Therefore the juniors had hailed with delight the news that Clinton had been dismissed.

Dr. Stafford had taken this step after the colonel had been insane enough to dress the juniors under his control in a weird uniform. And the previous evening the Housemaster had received his marching orders.

And now this morning he was dead!

Quite early the discovery had been made. There was no doubt whatever that the colonel had been brutally murdered. But St. Frank's was not exactly stunned by this tragedy, awful though it was. The terrible event which had bereft the boys of their equanimity was the arrest of Dr. Stafford.

The Head of St. Frank's had been taken away by the police, charged with the wilful murder of Colonel Clinton!

This was the most appalling of all. The fellows were shocked at the fate which had befallen Colonel Clinton, but he was not exactly mourned. Throughout the whole College House he had been cordially detested. So it was little wonder that the boys received the news of his death without going into hysterics.

And the tragedy was dwarfed beside the catastrophe to the Head. Dr. Stafford was respected and honoured by all; a fine old gentleman, kindly and generous, it was an outrage to believe that he could be guilty of murder.

Not one boy in ten doubted his innocence. The juniors, particularly, did not trouble to look at the evidence. They had blind faith in the Head, and believed in him staunchly and loyally.

But some of the seniors knew all the facts, and they were troubled by uneasy doubts. I knew all the facts, too, for I was in a unique position at St. Frank's. Mr. Nelson Lee, my guv'nor, occupied the position of Housemaster in the Ancient House, and there were very few things he kept back from me.

Naturally, he was investigating this crime. Being a schoolmaster made no difference whatever to his remarkable detective instincts. He was keen as a razor, and it was his fixed intention to probe the mystery to the bottom and to establish the Headmaster's innocence.

"Dr. Stafford is not guilty, Nipper," the guv'nor had said to me, soon after the Head's arrest. "You may take that as a positive fact. The evidence, I will admit, is black, and Inspector Jameson is hardly to be blamed for the action he took."

"He's a rotter, sir!" I declared hotly.

"Hardly that, my boy. Jameson believes that he has done his duty, and a murder charge, as you are well aware, is the most serious of all. With such proof of the Head's guilt, it was quite impossible for him to remain at liberty. That, at all events, is the inspector's point of view."

"Do you think the evidence is strong, sir?" I asked.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It is altogether too strong, Nipper," he replied smoothly. "It is so obvious that it is palpably a fake. The inspector, however, does not see it in that light. One of Dr. Stafford's slippers was found in the murdered man's study, blood-stained. His handkerchief was also there, and in a similar condition. But the blackest point of all is that the Headmaster's guilt seems established by the fact that the poker belonging to his own study set is smeared with blood. It is apparently the weapon which was used for committing the crime. At the present moment it is securely locked up in my care, and will await the inspection of a man from Scotland Yard."

"The evidence is pretty strong, sir," I remarked thoughtfully. "I didn't know all this before. I thought the inspector had

arrested the Head just because of that quarrel last night."

"The quarrel between Dr. Stafford and Colonel Clinton was most violent, and Jameson undoubtedly realised the significance of the affair. But, my dear Nipper, I cannot bring myself to believe that Dr. Stafford is guilty. We will assume, just for the sake of argument, that he actually did kill the colonel. Would he have left one of his slippers in Clinton's study?"

"He might have done in a panic, sir."

"It is possible, certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But that point is scarcely worth considering, for we have ample evidence to prove that the murderer did not leave in a panic. Still assuming that the Head is guilty, we are faced by the fact that he remained beside his victim in order to wipe his hands upon his handkerchief. Having performed this calm action, he tossed the handkerchief into the fireplace. Then he picked up the poker with which the colonel had been killed and took it back to his own study, without even going to the insignificant trouble of wiping it. How does it strike you, Nipper?"

"A bit absurd, sir."

"Of course it is absurd," agreed the gov'nor. "But the police are compelled to act upon the evidence they find. It is terribly unfortunate that the Head should have been implicated, but I am hopeful of establishing his innocence very shortly. His position is grave."

"But who left the slipper in Clinton's study, sir?" I asked. "And who took the poker to the Head's study?"

"Ah, you are asking questions which cannot be answered at present," said Nelson Lee. "It is quite clear, however, that Dr. Stafford is the victim of a plot. The real murderer may not have had any grudge against the Head personally, but he took advantage of that quarrel to safeguard himself by casting the suspicion on to Dr. Stafford. I have already made a few discoveries."

"What are they, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"You will have to wait, young 'un," said Lee, shaking his head. "I can tell you nothing further at the moment."

And although I accused him of being mean, he wouldn't say another word. The fact that Nelson Lee believed in the Head's innocence had a big influence among the great hulk of the fellows.

Some boys, however, openly sneered, and stated their belief in the Head's guilt. Fullwood and Co., the Nuts of the Ancient House, appeared to gloat over Dr. Stafford's great misfortune.

"Serve him right, I say," declared Fullwood. "I've always reckoned that the Head's temper would lead him into trouble one day. He's under arrest, an' he deserves to be hanged. Murder's a serious thing."

"Oh, rot!" said Gulliver uneasily. "I don't believe the Head's guilty——"

"Hasn't he been arrested?"

"Yes, but——"

"But rats!" sneered Fullwood. "The police wouldn't arrest a man like the Head

unless the evidence was absolutely conclusive. I believe he killed the colonel, anyhow, and I don't mind saying it!"

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind saying it again?" roared Edward Oswald Handforth, emerging from the Ancient House in time to hear Fullwood's remarks. "I'd better give you warning, though, that I'll punch your nose if you do!"

Fullwood laughed.

"Are you going to champion the old scoundrel?" he jeered. "I believe the Head killed Colonel Clinton, and I don't care a rap for your——"

Bang!

Handforth was as good as his word. His fist shot out and struck Fullwood's elegant nose with considerable force. The leader of the Nuts went over backwards with a yell, and his swell attire was by no means improved by the sudden contact with the muddy ground.

"Ow! You—you rotter!" snarled Fullwood.

"Get up!" bellowed Handforth wrathfully. "Get up, you cad!"

Fullwood was already doing so, but as soon as he was on his feet Handforth's fist shot out a second time, and again Fullwood went down.

"Yaroooh!" he howled frantically.

"The first punch I promised you, and the second punch was for referring to the Head as an old scoundrel!" said Handforth calmly. "Understand? If any fellow says in my hearing that Dr. Stafford's guilty, I'll punch him until he can't stand! That's my programme!"

And Handforth glared round him, as though to defy anybody who would dare to raise a word of protest. Quite a number of juniors were standing about in groups, and I was chatting with Sir Montie and Tommy just inside the lobby.

Mornig lessons were over—at least, the farce which did duty for morning lessons. For on this tragic day none of the fellows thought about school work. And the masters cared nothing for maintaining order in the class-rooms.

It was quite on the cards that the whole school would be sent home for a week or two, but this all depended upon the verdict of the jury at the inquest. If the Head remained in the hands of the police, charged with murder, the whole country would ring with the story, and it would be necessary to allow things to quieten down. Moreover, St. Frank's would need a new Headmaster.

The boys knew nothing of this, of course—about a possible break-up, I mean. Nelson Lee had told me in confidence, but he had also expressed the opinion that Dr. Stafford would be back again within a day or two, freed from all suspicion.

"Yes, I'm determined!" declared Handforth, gazing round him grimly. "Nobody's going to breathe a word against the Head in my presence!"

"You silly ass!" shouted Hubbard. "What about the evidence? What about that quarrel last night?"

Handforth smiled pityingly.

"Evidence!" he exclaimed with a snort. "What the dickens does evidence matter? We all know the Head, I suppose? We all know that he's a gentleman to his backbone, and a kind-hearted old chap generally. He hasn't been proved guilty yet, and until he is I'm going to stick by him through thick and thin!"

"Bravo, Handy!" I said approvingly.

"No need to say that," snapped Handforth. "I'm not doing anything decent by speaking up for the Head—it's simply a matter of duty. It's the duty of every fellow in this school to remain staunch by Dr. Stafford. Evidence doesn't matter a rap. If it was ten times as black, I'd think just the same!"

"Dear old boy, you've got your faults, but you're a rippin' sort of chap at heart," declared Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Begad! I'm willing to join your movement this instant. I believe in the Head right through. I do, really. He's as innocent of killing the colonel as I am!"

"Of course he is!" declared Handforth. "Who dares to say otherwise?"

"I do!"

Handforth twisted round and found himself looking at Reginald Pitt.

"You—you believe the Head's guilty?" roared Handforth.

"Not at all," said Pitt calmly. "But you dared anybody to say otherwise, Handy. I don't like being dared, you know. If you'd care to punch my nose, you're at liberty to try it on!"

"You silly fathead!" said Handforth. "I'm surprised at you, Pitt! Joking when the Head's lingering in a cold cell, with nothing but a hard plank to sit on, and stale bread and cold water to keep him alive! And you're joking!"

Pitt grinned.

"Your ideas of the Bannington police-station accommodation are a bit off-side, aren't they?" he said. "It's news to me that a chap arrested on suspicion is forced to linger in a cell."

Handforth did not deign to reply, but turned away with a sniff. He knew well enough that his picture had been exaggerated. But he was grimly determined to carry on his programme. And before the end of half an hour quite a number of juniors were suffering from swollen noses. Incidentally, Handforth's fist was quite sore, but ready to continue its good work until further orders if necessary.

And Handforth was not content with dealing with the Remove alone. He tried it on a member of the Fifth, with disastrous consequences. He came across Chambers and Phillips, and the two seniors were discussing the Head. Phillips was inclined to scoff at the evidence, but Chambers, who thought more of himself than anybody else did, argued that it was quite possible for the Head, under certain conditions, to have committed the crime. Chambers was probably only voicing that opinion for the sake

of argument, for he was a decent enough fellow in the main.

"Hallo!" said Chambers suddenly. "What do you want?"

Handforth had paused, listening, and Church and McClure were tugging at him to continue his way.

"What's that you are saying about the Head?" asked Handforth grimly.

"My dear kid, it wouldn't interest you," said Chambers. "You're not old enough to go into these matters. Personally, I think it's quite possible that Dr. Stafford is guilty."

"Hold on!" interrupted Handforth. "Have you heard my warning?"

"Your what?"

"My warning!" roared Handforth. "If any fellow expresses the opinion that the Head is guilty in my hearing, he's going to have his nose punched!"

"By Jove!" said Chambers, staring. "That's jolly interesting, you know. And would you punch my nose, Handforth? Aren't even the seniors exempt? I certainly do think that Dr. Stafford is guilty."

"Well, you've asked me for it!" said Handforth resignedly.

He rolled up his sleeves deliberately, and Chambers and Phillips grinned. Handforth's chums, on the other hand, were looking rather alarmed.

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" hissed McClure. "You can't punch Chambers's nose! And it's not the thing to make a scene in the Triangle."

"I can't help it!" snapped Handforth. "I gave the silly ass a warning."

Bang!

Handforth dashed in suddenly, probably realising that deliberate tactics would be of no avail. His only chance was to take Chambers by surprise, and he certainly succeeded in doing that. The Fifth-Former went over with a yell.

"Run, you ass!" gasped McClure.

"Not likely!" roared Handforth. "This rotter believes that the Head's guilty, and I don't make exceptions of anybody. If he's got any decency in him, he'll admit that he deserves a swollen nose!"

Chambers didn't admit anything of the sort. He sprang to his feet and rushed at Handforth. The next five seconds were most interesting, from Chambers's point of view. Handforth was hardly capable of thinking.

He received about ten blows before he knew what was happening, and then he sat down in a puddle with great force. In fact, the splashes caused liberally bespattered Church and McClure, and even Phillips received his share.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth dazedly.

Both Chambers and Phillips marched off, the former feeling that his duty had been done. Handforth felt that an earthquake had happened, and he sat in the puddle as though he liked it, making no attempt to get up.

"Having a bath?" inquired De Valerio, who happened to be passing.

"Groooh!" mumbled Handforth incoherently.

"Some chaps have queer tastes," went on De Valerie. "I should think that water must be pretty cold, and, anyhow, it doesn't look overclean. If you want a bath, Handy, why don't you go indoors? It's positively indecent, sitting out here in full view——"

"You silly ass!" howled Handforth, jumping up. "It was Chambers who did this! But I punched his nose!" he added, with sudden satisfaction.

De Valerie grinned.

"You seem to have got the worst of it, old son," he said calmly. "The result of too much zeal, I suppose? It ought to be a lesson to you not to be such a fathead!"

"I don't call myself a fathead for remaining loyal to the Head!" said Handforth witheringly. "When I take up a stand nothing shifts me! I'm proud to have sat in that puddle—absolutely proud!"

"Your idea of pride is very queer, then!" sniffed McClure. "What price your trucks?"

"About threepence, I should say!" grinned De Valerie. "I shouldn't care to offer you more for them. And you must be pretty cold in the rear!"

Handforth snorted, and marched off to change his clothes. Inwardly, he probably decided to steer clear of Fifth-Formers in future. But he maintained that he would even punch a prefect's nose, if necessary. It was noticeable, however, that when Handforth passed a prefect, he steered very wide. It was far better to be cautious.

Church and McClure remained in the Triangle, and they witnessed the arrival of two gentlemen. I witnessed their arrival, too, with great interest. For one of them was Sir Rupert Manderley, the chairman of the Board of Governors; and the other was Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

The latter, of course, was an old friend of Nelson Lee's, and he greeted me cordially, but with unusual gravity. After that he and Sir Rupert lost no time in going to the gov'nor's study.

The real investigation was about to commence.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS FINGER-PRINTS

SIR RUPERT MANDERLEY was very agitated.

"The whole tragedy, Mr. Lee, has filled me with horror," he said unsteadily. "Dr. Stafford reported to me that Colonel Clinton was acting in a most outrageous fashion, and it was considered necessary to dismiss the colonel forthwith. But I never dreamed that such a disaster as this would occur. The school will take years to recover from such a blow."

The baronet paced up and down Nelson Lee's study restlessly.

"I do not suggest that there is no necessity to worry," said Lee, "but the position is not so serious as you seem to imagine, Sir

Rupert. Clinton is dead—murdered—and Dr. Stafford has been detained by the local police. But the evidence against him is not overwhelming."

"I really fail to understand you, Mr. Lee," said Sir Rupert. "By what I gather, Dr. Stafford's guilt has been positively proved."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The facts known so far are these," he said. "The doctor quarrelled rather severely with Clinton late last night. The quarrel, however, was entirely of the colonel's making. He got Dr. Stafford into his study by what was really a trick—and then insulted him in the most violent terms. Naturally, the Head was angered, and he replied with considerable heat. He was fully justified in doing so. I might also add that the colonel refused to allow his visitor to depart, standing before the door and shouting at the top of his voice. It was Mr. Crowell who went to the rescue, and Dr. Stafford at once departed—very agitated and thoroughly disgusted. He went straight to bed, after giving me the brief details of the scene. He was late in rising this morning, and that is not a significant point. It was only natural that he should be late."

"But what about the other evidence?"

"I will deal with that now," replied Lee. "One of Dr. Stafford's handkerchiefs was found in the murdered man's study—grimly blood-stained. There was also one of the Head's slippers there, also blood-stained. The fellow-slipper was found in Dr. Stafford's own study. The weapon with which the crime was committed—according to Inspector's Jamieson's belief—was the heavy poker from the Head's fireplace. It is certainly smeared with blood, but there is nothing to actually prove that it was used to batter the colonel to death."

Detective-inspector Lennard looked surprised.

"It seems to me that no further proof was necessary, Lee," he remarked. "The very fact that that slipper was blood-stained proves beyond question that Dr. Stafford was in the dead man's study after the crime had been committed. And you must admit that the poker is a piece of deadly evidence."

"To all appearances—yes."

"Don't you think the crime was committed with that poker?"

"I prefer not to say just now," replied Nelson Lee calmly.

"You are attempting to shield Dr. Stafford," declared Sir Rupert. "It won't do, Mr. Lee. Greatly as I respect the doctor—much as I honour his good work at St. Frank's—I cannot help coming to the conclusion that he attacked the colonel in a moment of anger. He had provocation, I do not doubt, but the terrible crime can only be laid at his door."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am very sorry to hear that your faith in Dr. Stafford is so badly shaken," he said quietly. "Good gracious! The very thought is preposterous, Sir Rupert. What do you think, Lennard?"

The chief-inspector grunted.

"Well, it looks deucedly queer," he said bluntly. "It's strange that a murderer should leave such tracks behind him, but it's not exactly unusual. It wasn't a premeditated crime, in any case. The blow must have been delivered in a time of fury, and then panic followed. It's quite likely that the Headmaster would leave all those traces."

"And it is quite likely, I presume, that he would calmly go back to bed?" said Lee grimly. "You also overlook the fact, Lennard, that not one blow was struck, but at least twenty. Clinton's head is in a shocking condition, and I seriously doubt if Dr. Stafford could have wielded the poker with sufficient force to inflict the injuries. If it actually comes to the worst—a trial, I mean—the Head will probably be acquitted upon the ground that he is incapable of such strength as the murderer displayed. But it mustn't come to a trial—it won't. I'll guarantee that Dr. Stafford will be at liberty—without a stain on his character—before the end of the present week."

"Then you must know more than we do," declared Lennard.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do," replied Nelson Lee. "There is a very extraordinary phenomenon with regard to the poker. If Dr. Stafford is guilty, it stands to reason that he handled the poker quite a lot, doesn't it? It also stands to reason that he was the last to grasp the handle—since that portion of it has not been touched by any fingers after it was found early this morning."

"That's right enough," agreed the chief-inspector.

"The finger-prints visible upon it would be Dr. Stafford's?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Before the Head went away to Bannington this morning I took the precaution to obtain his finger-prints," said Nelson Lee. "I did so without his being aware of the fact—by simply making him handle a smooth-covered book I had prepared. Later on I obtained Jameson's permission to closely examine the poker-handle—on the understanding that I did not touch it. The inspector was most careful that you should have a clear field, Lennard. He was with me when I made the experiment, and he will probably be here again before long."

"But what did you discover?" asked Sir Rupert anxiously. "And how could you possibly examine finger-prints on the poker, Mr. Lee? I should not have thought it possible to detect any marks whatever upon such a smooth surface."

Nelson Lee smiled.

He walked over to a cupboard, producing a bunch of keys at the same time. Lee unlocked the cupboard, and took out the poker. It had been resting very carefully, so that only the tips of it touched, and Nelson Lee took care to handle it in the centre. The poker was quite an ordinary article, except that it was unusually heavy in design. The handle was of polished brass and quite smooth

"Not much to see with the naked eye, I will admit," remarked the detective. "But under the microscope, Sir Rupert, quite a number of finger-prints stand out most distinctly. Just look closely."

Both Sir Rupert and Lennard peered forward. They saw several faint, greyish smudges upon the polished surface, and these, upon close inspection, revealed themselves as distinctive finger-prints.

"But how is it they stand out so boldly?" asked Sir Rupert.

"They were almost invisible originally, but I simply blew a little prepared powder over the handle—you know all about it, Lennard," replied Nelson Lee. "The finger prints then stood out boldly, as you now see them."

The detective produced a red-covered volume from his desk.

"Upon this," he went on, "you will observe several finger-prints made by Dr. Stafford himself. Now, this is the curious point. The marks upon the poker and the marks upon this book are quite different—they were not made by the same hand."

The chief-inspector whistled.

"You haven't lost much time, Lee," he remarked. "This is a most important point and a point decidedly in Dr. Stafford's favour. I shall, of course, verify all this personally although I can take your word. Still, as you know, I'm here to investigate, and I've got to do it."

"I am afraid you will think I am very dull," said Sir Rupert, "but I confess that I am somewhat confused. How do these finger-prints help us? Why do they constitute a point in Dr. Stafford's favour?"

"For the simple reason, Sir Rupert, that the marks upon the poker were not made by the Headmaster at all," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "We may take it for granted that they are the finger-prints of the murderer; and, in my opinion, there can be no question of Dr. Stafford's innocence. This is the weapon used in the crime—taking it for granted that appearances are not deceptive. Dr. Stafford didn't handle it—so what is the inference?"

Detective-Inspector Lennard pursed his lips.

"It's all very nice, Lee, but I'm afraid it's not quite strong enough," he said. "Mind you, I've got more than an idea that the poor old gentleman is just a victim of circumstantial evidence—and perhaps some trickery as well. But that doesn't alter the position very much at the moment. Dr. Stafford will have to be detained a little longer—until something more concrete turns up. By the way, Lee, wasn't he able to give an account of his movements during the night?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Poor Dr. Stafford was too upset to make any statement whatever," he replied. "To the best of my belief, he remained in his bedroom the whole night through. Nevertheless, if he could prove a satisfactory alibi, his release would only be a matter of minutes. And for that reason, Lennard, I suggest that we go over to Bannington at once in my car."

No doubt we shall find that Dr. Stafford has somewhat recovered his composure."

This suggestion was approved of, and the trio decided to go.

"I'm rather sorry I expressed some doubts a short while ago," said Sir Rupert, as he rose to his feet. "It wasn't worthy of me, Mr. Lee, and I want you to forget it. Of course, I stand loyally by the Headmaster. Notwithstanding the terrible evidence, I cannot bring myself to believe that he has been guilty of such a violent crime. By the way, where is the—er—body?"

"Still in the College House," replied Nelson Lee. "Clinton's study is awaiting Mr. Lennard's inspection, but there is no great hurry for that. It will be far better to spend a preliminary hour in visiting Bannington."

They were soon off, making the journey in Nelson Lee's comfortable touring-car. It was still comparatively early in the day when they arrived at the police-station—not much past midday, at all events.

Inspector Jameson was there, and he welcomed the Scotland Yard man eagerly. This was not surprising, for the worthy Jameson was most anxious to shift the responsibility from his own shoulders on to those of the London detective.

"Why, yes, there's no reason why you shouldn't see the prisoner," he exclaimed, in response to Nelson Lee's inquiry. "Dr. Stafford is much calmer now, but I am afraid a collapse will soon come unless his innocence is quickly proved—that is, if it can be proved. He's not a youngster, and he's feeling his position keenly. The doctor has already declared that the poor old gentleman can't last long under the present circumstances."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Sir Rupert.

He was anxious to be escorted to Dr. Stafford's apartment. The Head was not incarcerated in a chilly cell, as Handforth had pictured. He occupied quite a cosy apartment, where a fire was burning cheerfully.

"I am glad you have come, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford, as the visitors were ushered in. "Why, Sir Rupert, it is a surprise to see you here."

"My dear sir, this is a truly shocking affair," declared the baronet gravely. "Please rest assured that I am fully convinced of your innocence—although, to my shame, I must admit that I was doubtful for just one moment. I hope that confession will not destroy your good opinion of me."

Dr. Stafford smiled faintly.

"It is rather wonderful that you believe in me at all, Sir Rupert," he said. "The evidence, as I have reason to know, is appallingly strong, and I am almost in a state of despair."

The Head was quite composed, although his haggard expression and anxious eyes told of the bitterness of the ordeal through which he was passing.

"You have met me before, I think, Dr. Stafford," remarked the chief-inspector quietly. "I am inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, and I have been called down to this part of the country to investigate the

murder. It will relieve you to know, perhaps, that I'm quite on your side. As a detective-officer, it is my duty to establish the facts, and I must do so at all costs. My own personal opinion, however, is that you have been outrageously victimised. I want to help you—and I want you to help me."

"You are very kind, Mr. Lennard," said the Head gratefully. "It is good to learn that I have not been cast aside and scorned. Upon my soul! What a ghastly predicament for a man to be in! How are the boys taking it, Mr. Lee? I have been worrying for hours on that point alone."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You would cease to worry if you could hear what the boys are saying," he replied. "Almost without exception, they express implicit belief in your innocence, doctor. Were the evidence doubly as conclusive, you would not lose the loyal support of your boys."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said the Head fervently. "And what is the position? Please tell me—I am quite strong enough to stand the truth. Will it be necessary for me to go through the ordeal of appearing before a magistrate? I might be able to face that, but I am afraid I shall be dead before the assizes."

"Come, come!" protested Nelson Lee. "You mustn't talk in that strain, Dr. Stafford. I am hopeful of establishing your innocence this very week. If you could only help us, that happy result might come even sooner."

"But what can I do?" asked the Head wonderingly.

"You can tell us how you spent the hours of last night," said Lennard.

"I am afraid I can prove no alibi, if that is what you mean," Dr. Stafford exclaimed, shaking his head. "After that dreadful scene with the colonel I merely had a short chat with Mr. Lee, and then went straight to my apartment."

"You remained there throughout the night?"

"Why, yes, of course. I was half afraid that I should not be able to sleep, but I believe I dropped off almost at once," said the Head. "That is frequently the case when one is expecting to lie awake. I arose as usual this morning—perhaps somewhat later. And then I heard the terrible news of the colonel's death—followed swiftly by my—my arrest. I have no doubt that my attitude was one of guilt, for I collapsed. Who would not collapse when arrested upon such a terrible charge?"

"I understand perfectly, Dr. Stafford," said the chief-inspector. "You find it impossible, then, to prove that you remained in your bedroom throughout the night? I was afraid that would be the case. And now, can you give us any hint as to the identity of the real murderer?"

"My dear sir, I am hopelessly bewildered."

"The colonel had no enemies?"

"I think it is quite possible that he had many," replied the Head. "Colonel Clinton was the kind of man who made enemies

wherever he went. But none of them, I imagine, would descend to murder."

"You can remember nothing which would serve as a slight clue?" went on Lennard. "Even the smallest incident, though unimportant to your mind, might possess a very special significance to us."

"I cannot make any mention of the colonel's life before he came to St. Frank's, because I know nothing," said the Head. "The only enemies he made in the school itself were mainly the boys of the Lower Forms. And they, of course, detested the man because of his harsh methods. His fellow-masters practically ignored him, but it is positively certain that they would never indulge in violence. No; the whole matter is a dreadful mystery to me."

The inspector looked across at Nelson Lee.

"I am afraid we shall have to set to work from the other end, old man," he said smoothly. "Strictly speaking, you know, I ought to do my best to prove Dr. Stafford's guilt. But I can't bring myself to do it—an official detective is not exactly a machine. He has his feelings, and he has common-sense. I make no boast of mine, but it would surely be of very poor quality if I blindly credited the Headmaster's guilt because of his arrest."

Dr. Stafford's eyes gleamed hopefully.

"I feel that my freedom will soon come, with so many friends working on my behalf," he said, bravely attempting to be cheerful. "If you can only find the man who really killed Clinton, Mr. Lee, my trouble will be at an end. I need not urge you to work your hardest, for I know that you will do so."

"You may rest assured, doctor, that no stone will remain unturned in the investigation," promised Nelson Lee. "Keep your spirits up, and all will be well. You will return to St. Frank's with your character as scrupulously clean as it was at this hour yesterday."

Every effort was made to cheer the old gentleman, and when his visitors left him he was feeling almost bright and certainly hopeful. The first shock of his arrest over, he awaited patiently—blindly trusting to Nelson Lee to release him from the awful predicament. And the knowledge of his own innocence caused him to remain confident and proud. He had nothing to fear—so why should he worry?

Nelson Lee and Sir Rupert Manderley had no doubt in their minds. Lennard, too, was quite sure that he would have to probe deeply in order to get on the track of the actual murderer.

"We're going to have a stiff task, Jameson," said the Scotland Yard man grimly.

"How do you make that out, sir?" asked the police-inspector. "We've got our man, and the evidence——"

"I wish we really had got our man," interrupted Lennard. "Dr. Stafford is detained, I will admit, but I'm afraid you've made a blunder, Jameson. Oh, no, you needn't look worried. You took the only

step possible, but that doesn't mean to say that it was right."

Shortly afterwards Nelson Lee took his departure, accompanied by Lennard and Sir Rupert. They returned at once to St. Frank's, and the chief-inspector lost no time in commencing operations.

The scene of the crime was closely examined; the body was subjected to a careful scrutiny, and steps were taken with a view to getting on the track of the murderer.

But the only result of Chief-detective-inspector Lennard's investigation was that the case was blacker than ever against Dr. Stafford.

The position was just about as serious as it could possibly be.

CHAPTER III.

ATTENDING TO STARK!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST sighed. "St. Frank's is havin' a shockin' time just now, dear old boys," he observed, stirring his tea thoughtfully. "The poor chaps in the College House were cheerin' like anythin' yesterday. They've been goin' through the mill with the colonel, an' now comes this frightful affair. It's an appallin' position."

"Yes, and nothing seems to have been done yet," I growled. "The colonel's remains have been taken away, thank goodness, but the Head's still under arrest. It's absolutely galling to think of him being detained in Bannington. I'm going along to the guv'nor in a few minutes."

"What for?" asked Watson.

"To hear if anything fresh has turned up," I replied grimly. "I don't see why I should be left out in the cold. What's the good of having privileges if I don't use 'em? Mr. Lee's my guv'nor, and I mean to know things."

"If you can, old fellow," remarked Sir Montie placidly.

"You leave it to me!" I said, finishing my cup at a gulp. "I'm going to the guv'nor's study straight away, and I shan't come back empty-handed."

I left study C, and strode along the passage until I arrived at Nelson Lee's sanctum. Sir Rupert, I knew, was not with him; neither was Detective-Inspector Lennard. It was a good opportunity for me to make inquiries.

I tapped on the door and opened it. Nelson Lee was pacing up and down in a cloud of smoke, and his pipe was going at full pressure. He turned sharply and stared at me, but with a far-away expression in his eyes.

"Well, Nipper?" he snapped.

"I was just going to ask you, sir——"

"Don't ask anything, leave me alone!"

"But I want to know——"

"You'll know nothing yet," cut in Lee curtly. "Run away!"

"But——"

"Do you hear me?" roared the guv'nor.

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped despairingly.

I took the only course, and retired as gracefully as possible. I knew this particular mood well. Things hadn't gone quite right, and Nelson Lee was puzzling things out in his mind. He would stand no interference, and to attempt to talk to him was an impossible proposition.

"Well, it's a good sign, anyhow," I concluded, as I walked away. "When the gov'nor has a fit of this sort it generally leads to something good. So I shall have to wait until later on—perhaps until tomorrow."

I was rather disappointed, and I grinned rather ruefully as I remembered Sir Montie's calm remark. He had been right. I should know things, if I could. As it happened, I couldn't.

On my way back to Study C I passed down the Sixth Form passage. It was quite empty, for the seniors were all at tea. The Ancient House, indeed, was unusually quiet. There was no shouting or laughing in the studies. The one subject of conversation was the colonel's murder and the Head's terrible position. The fellows were in no mood for fun.

I was just passing the door of the study occupied by Starke and Kenmore, when I paused involuntarily and gave a little start. The two prefects were evidently having an altercation, and Kenmore's voice was plainly audible out in the passage. I heard what he said without trying to do so.

"Rot!" Kenmore exclaimed. "You know jolly well that the Head's innocent. Starke—your evidence will prove it to the hilt. And if you don't tell what you know, I will. It's a serious matter."

I came to a halt abruptly, and with my ears on the stretch, I was eavesdropping now, and had no compunction in doing so. I felt that I was fully justified in listening. That one utterance of Kenmore's told me that Starke knew something.

He was the most detested prefect in the Ancient House, with Kenmore a close second. The pair shared the same study, and were of similar habits. Bullying and petty vindictiveness were not their only crimes. They liked to consider themselves "fast," and smoked and gambled and broke bounds frequently. Starke was a regular visitor at the White Harp, in Belton, where he either played cards or billiards—both for money. And Kenmore often accompanied him.

"Don't be such a fool!" I heard Starke exclaim gruffly.

"It's all very well to take up that attitude," retorted Kenmore. "I'm not a thin-skinned chap, and I don't particularly love the Head. But you can't keep back that evidence of yours, Starke, it wouldn't be safe."

"What do you mean—safe?"

"Well, supposing it all came out—what you saw, I mean—you'd be in a frightful hole," said Kenmore. "Besides, I don't believe in it. In a case like this, Starke, you ought to shove your own feelings aside."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Starke. "What

are the police for? If they can't find out the truth they're no good. They've got to prove the Head's innocence, and I don't see why I should interfere."

"Do you mean that you're going to let the Head remain in custody for days—perhaps weeks—when you're in a position to get him released at once? It's not playing the game, Starke."

"I can't help that," snapped Starke savagely. "I'm not going to get myself into a thundering row by admitting that I broke bounds last night. Why, I might be sacked, and it's not worth it."

"You'll let the Head be hanged, I suppose?" snorted Kenmore.

"Oh, rats!"

There was a short silence in the study, and I listened with a new interest, waiting for the rascally prefects to speak again. The passage remained empty, fortunately, and I was not spotted by other Sixth-Formers.

"Look here, I don't believe in your idea," said Kenmore suddenly. "If it wasn't a question of murder, I'd let the Head look after himself, but—"

"Why can't you let it drop?" snapped Starke savagely.

"Because I've got a bit of decency in me," retorted the other. "You're a cad, Starke. You'd rather see the poor old Head suffering torture than own up about last night. If you don't do it, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing!" cut in Starke furiously. "In any case, I'd deny that I was out at all, if you peached. But you needn't be so jolly alarmed. If things don't look any better for the Head this day week, I'll speak up. But I'm not going to get myself into a hole just to help the police."

"You silly ass, it would be to help the Head," retorted Kenmore. "How can the police find out about that business last night? Everybody else was asleep, and you're the only chap who could give the evidence. Still, if you undertake to speak out in a week's time—"

I was unable to bear any more, for at that moment I was compelled to walk forward. A door had opened down the passage, and I didn't want to be found listening. Not that I was ashamed of it. I felt that I had every right to hear that most interesting conversation.

Walter Starke, of the Sixth, was in a position to get the Head released at once!

And yet the awful cad was willing to remain silent, just because he feared that he would get into a row. It was more than contemptible—it was positively wicked. And I walked towards study C, boiling with indignation. There was just a chance that Kenmore was wrong; that Starke's evidence, whatever it was, wouldn't have the effect the prefects believed. But from the way they had spoken I was pretty sure that Starke knew quite a lot.

And I burst into Study C with blazing eyes. Sir Montie and Tommy were just clearing up the tea things, and they regarded me curiously.

"Been havin' a row with somebody, dear boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"The cad, the awful scoundrel!" I exclaimed fiercely.

"If you are referrin' to Fullwood, I heartily agree," said Tregellis-West. "Fullwood was sayin' just before tea that the Head must be guilty——"

"Rats to Fullwood!" I snapped. "I'm talking about Starke. Just listen to this, my sons. I was passing Starke's study just now, and I heard——"

"Begad! You don't mean to say you listened?" asked Montie, shocked.

"Shut up, you ass!" said Watson.

"Yes, I do mean to say I listened," I replied grimly. "I'm not sorry for it, either. Starke broke bounds last night, and while he was out he saw something which will prove the Head's innocence. And the awful rotter isn't going to say anything to the police! Now, was I justified in listening?"

"Under those circumstances, old boy, perhaps you were," said the schoolboy baronet gravely. "But do you think it's really true or just a yarn?"

"It must be true," I replied. "Kenmore threatened to give the information himself at first, but Starke talked him round. He's afraid of getting into trouble—and the Head's under arrest!"

"Look here!" snorted Watson. "We'll go straight to Mr. Lee and tell him——"

"No good!" I cut in.

"Why not?"

"Because Starke would deny everything if he was questioned," I replied grimly. "He'd probably swear that he was in bed all night. And then where should we be? Starke can't be forced to speak, you know."

"Then what's to be done?" asked Tommy blankly.

"I don't know yet!" I said. "If Starke denied breaking bounds, and swore that he didn't know anything, he couldn't come forward after that. For one thing, he wouldn't be believed. We shall have to think of some scheme to force Starke to speak of his own accord, without knowing that he's being forced."

"That sounds easy, I don't think!" remarked Watson.

"Really, old boy, I don't quite get hold of your meanin'," said Sir Montie, regarding me steadily through his pince-nez. "I shall be frightfully obliged if you'll explain how we can force Starke to speak without him knowin' that any force is bein' applied. It doesn't strike me as bein' possible."

"Strategy is needed," I replied grimly. "Haste, in a case like this, is fatal. If I go and tell the gov'nor what I overheard, Starke will probably deny everything when questioned. Something's got to be done, something out of the common. The only way that I can see is to scare Starke into giving his evidence."

"Oh, rot!" grunted Watson crossly. "How can we scare him?"

"Begad! It ain't a bad idea," said Tregellis-West, stroking his noble chin. "A

plan has just entered my head, dear boys, but I suppose you'll both laugh at it when I explain. It's rather tall."

"Out with it!" I said briskly.

"Well, Nipper boy, supposin' a ghost spoke to Starke?" suggested Sir Montie calmly. "Supposin' a ghostly voice warned him to——"

"Are you trying to be funny?" snapped Watson.

"Let him finish, you ass!" I said severely. "Montie isn't a fellow to suggest ideas unless he's pretty sure of them. Go ahead, old son."

"I'm half afraid you will scoff, dear fellows," said Sir Montie apologetically. "This ghost won't be seen by Starke, but he'll hear the voice comin' from nowhere. In deep, solemn tones the voice will tell Starke to go straight to Mr. Lee an' relate his evidence in favour of the Head. Starke will be scared frightfully, an' he'll probably hurry away at once. That's the idea."

"You—you silly fathead!" snorted Watson, glaring. "I suppose you've only got to go outside and engage a ghost for the evening? The idea's all right if you can get the ghost to do the trick, but ghosts can't be found when they're wanted!"

Sir Montie smiled.

"Pray refrain from bein' so absurd, Tommy," he observed. "I am well aware that ghosts are not obtainable. But we can find a substitute, surely? I was thinkin' of Nicodemus Trotwood——"

"By Jupiter!" I ejaculated, starting up. "You've got it, Montie!"

"Do you call Nicodemus a ghost?" roared Watson.

"No, old fellow, but he's a ventriloquist," said Montie calmly. "He can throw his voice in the most amazin' way, an' Starke doesn't know it. Nicodemus Trotwood's gift is only known to a few of us, and not a single prefect or senior is aware of the fact. Starke will guess nothin' when he hears the voice. But we shall have to be careful, an' choose our opportunity."

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Tommy blankly. "You—you mean that Nick can throw his voice and make Starke believe that it's a ghost? It's not such a bad idea, after all, but I don't believe it'll work. Starke's not superstitious."

"But he's uneasy," I said grimly. "He doesn't know that I heard all about his escapade last night. He thinks it's a dead secret. So what's going to happen when a mysterious voice, coming from nowhere, tells him to go to Nelson Lee? Why, Starke will have about a dozen fits!"

"Begad! I hope not!" exclaimed Montie in alarm. "That would upset our plans."

"I don't mean literally, you ass," I grinned. "He'll be scared out of his wits, and the chances are that he'll rush to the gov'nor's study at once. It's a terrific idea of your's, Montie. Anything ghostly is always unnerving, and that's just the very thing to fit this particular case. Starke will go and give his evidence of his own accord, but it's up to us to give him the start."

Tommy Watson went out in search of Nicodemus. Meanwhile I thought out the details of the little scheme, and concluded it was most promising. On the face of it, the whole thing was childish and absurd. But we knew the truth—we knew that the voice would be Trotwood's. Starke wouldn't know, and he wouldn't be able to guess. Even allowing for the fact that he wasn't superstitious, the chances were that he would be thoroughly frightened. Starke wasn't possessed of boundless pluck.

Tommy soon returned with Nicodemus Trotwood. This junior was the exact counterpart of his brother Cornelius—they were twins. But while Cornelius was deaf and exceedingly simple, Nicodemus was astonishingly cute. His looks belied the fact, for he would easily be set down as a born simpleton. His eyes were brown and sleepy looking; his shock of hair was sandy coloured and untidy. His limbs were thin to the point of skinniness. He looked something of a freak, and he talked like one. But his common-sense on all matters was as sound as a bell. The juniors had grown to regard Nicodemus as a fellow to be reckoned with.

"My dear Nipper," he exclaimed, as he entered Study C. "Watson has informed me that you are desirous of my presence in this cheerful apartment. I am most willing to come, and will freely lend you any aid which it is within my power to bestow."

"We don't want any loans," I said briskly. "You've got to give your aid, Nick, my son. What's your private opinion about the Head? The truth, mind, no evasions."

"My dear friend, I have no hesitation in saying that Dr. Stafford is the victim of a most unfortunate blunder," replied Nicodemus gravely. "Only half an hour ago I was reluctantly obliged to knock Gulliver down for pronouncing his belief that the Head is guilty. Gulliver's nose, I'm afraid, is now somewhat inflamed."

"You seem to be following Handforth's tactics," I grinned. "Well, Nicodemus, Starke of the Sixth knows something about the Head, and he won't go forward with his information. Just listen, and I'll tell you."

Trotwood gave me his full attention, and he was soon in possession of the facts. He heartily agreed that I was fully and completely justified in listening to the conversation of Starke and Kenmore outside their study door. And Montie's "ghost" idea brought forth elaborate words of praise from Nicodemus.

"Nothing will be more calculated to have the desired effect," he declared. "I am willing—eager—to take part in this little comedy. But it is a comedy, I am fully aware, which may have the most important results. But may I venture to add a little suggestion of my own?"

"Go ahead, Montie won't mind," I said briskly.

"Begad! Not at all, old boy."

"Well, dear friends, I am of the opinion that the trick will be eminently successful," remarked Nicodemus, beaming upon us. "Starke is by no means valiant, and it is

safe to assume that he will collapse when the ghostly voice addresses him. But would it not be far better if that voice was one which Starke has heard frequently and can recognise?"

"But we don't want him to think that the voice is alive—" I began.

"You misunderstand me," Nicodemus hastened to put in. "This voice will be that of somebody who is dead. Therefore Starke will be positively assured that it is a spirit telling him to give his evidence."

"You mean Clinton?" I asked, with a start.

"Precisely. It will apparently be the colonel's ghost which addresses Starke."

"Begad!"

"Oh, I say!" muttered Watson.

"It's a bit too thick, Trotwood," I remarked slowly. "Somehow, it seems— Well, it's not quite decent— Hang it all, it's awful!"

Nicodemus nodded calmly.

"I am in perfect agreement with you, my good Nipper," he observed. "But is it not necessary that Starke's fright should be awful? We are anxious that the trick shall succeed, are we not? In such a case as this we must thrust aside our natural feelings of reluctance, and ruthlessly proceed with our purpose. The Headmaster is in a terrible predicament, and I, for one, am willing to descend to this questionable piece of trickery in order to effect his early release. A strange ghostly voice will probably succeed, but there is just a chance that Starke will ignore it. If, on the other hand, Starke appears to hear the colonel's ghost addressing him, he will unquestionably submit his evidence to Mr. Lee without a second's delay. I trust that you observe my point?"

"You're right, old man," I said grimly. "It's a serious matter, and we can't afford to fail. The thing must be done thoroughly, or not at all. So we'll do it thoroughly. And, after all, it's in a good cause, and it's only the recent and tragic death of the colonel which makes it seem so awful. We shouldn't think anything of making Gladstone's ghost speak."

Nicodemus grinned.

"We are agreed, then?" he asked mildly.

"Just as you like, old boys," said Sir Montie. "I'm willin'."

"I suppose the situation warrants it," remarked Watson. "But how are we going to do the giddy trick? Starke'll have to be caught alone somewhere."

"Of course," I agreed. "We shall have to watch him and seize our opportunity. He's bound to be alone for a few minutes between now and bedtime. And he'll have to be out of his study, too. There's no scope there; he'd think the voice was coming from the window, or through the keyhole. The Triangle would be the best place of all. Nick could hide behind the elms, or round one of the buttresses."

"An excellent suggestion, my dear friend," said Nicodemus, nodding gravely. "But will Starke be so obliging? It would be fatal to entice him out of doors. He would—

ahem—smell a rat immediately. As you sapiently observe, we must watch him and seize our opportunity."

It was a weary task, watching Starke. He remained in his study almost until supper time, and Kenmore was with him practically all the time. But just when we were beginning to become desperate, the Sixth-Former emerged from his study with Kenmore, and the words he uttered were very gratifying to us.

"No, I sha'n't be more than ten minutes," he said. "If Carlisle isn't handy I sha'n't waste time looking for him."

"All right; I'll be in the prefect's room," said Kenmore, walking off.

Watson and I were just round the bend of the passage, and we scuttled along to the lobby at the double. Trotwood and Sir Montie were waiting there—discussing, as a matter of fact, a new plan. But a new plan wasn't necessary.

"Outside!" I whispered hurriedly. "Starke's coming!"

We emerged into the dark Triangle.

"Starke's going over to see Carlisle," I went on. "That mean's he's going to the College House. Take up your position, Nicky. We'll hang about here, out of sight. Buck up!"

"I hasten away!" murmured Nicodemus.

He faded into the gloom, and I crouched behind one of the heavy stone buttresses which projected from the old stone wall near by. Sir Montie and Tommy were beside me, and we all held our breath.

The Triangle was very dark, and not a soul was to be seen. The atmosphere of tragedy still hung heavily over the old school, and the majority of the juniors preferred to remain indoors, where it was light and warm and where there was plenty of life. The dismal Triangle, dark and eerie, was avoided.

The conditions could not possibly have been better for the project in hand.

Nicodemus Trotwood had vanished, and there was no sign of him. And I waited with my chums, eager with expectation. I wouldn't have missed the spoofing of Starke for worlds. He was an utter rotter, and deserved to go through the ordeal.

The prefect came hustling down the steps, and he strode across the Triangle towards the College House, humming softly to himself. He was probably feeling very lonely and isolated.

"Now for it!" I breathed.

Starke walked on, and got midway across the wide, dark space.

"Halt! I would speak with you, Walter Starke!"

I almost jumped, and I felt Sir Montie and Tommy quiver. The deep, hollow voice was horribly sepulchral and ghost-like; yet, at the same time, the voice was undoubtedly Colonel Clinton's.

The Sixth-Former halted abruptly.

"Who—who's that?" he asked, in a scared, startled tone.

"Wretched youth!" came the strangely deep voice. "Do not dare to move! You are unable to see me, yet I know you, and wish to speak with you."

Starke gave a gasp. The voice sounded immediately in front of him—within a yard, it seemed! He turned, trembling, meaning to bolt back towards the Ancient House. The Triangle was empty—deserted—yet that voice—

"Halt! Do you hear me, boy?"

The colonel's ghostly voice now sounded from a different spot, but again in front of Starke. The prefect came to a standstill, panting heavily. He had not the slightest suspicion that a trick was being perpetrated.

"Obey my commands, Walter Starke, or you will be haunted——"

"I—I must be mad!" muttered Starke feverishly.

He stared round him wildly, now more accustomed to the gloom. Yes, he was alone. There wasn't a soul to be seen; and he knew that the voice was near by, within a yard or two of him! It was a spirit-voice! If Starke had been standing near some trees or bushes, he might have suspected. But here there was not an inch of cover for a sparrow. The voice simply couldn't be human!

"You are in possession of information which will be of great value to the police, Walter Starke," went on the "ghost" solemnly. "Wicked boy! You know full well that your Headmaster is innocent. Go! Go to Mr. Nelson Lee, and relate all you know! Waste not a second, or 'twill be bad for you. Heed my words now, or your night will be hideous; not only will my voice come to you, but——"

"Who—who are you?" gasped Starke faintly.

"Need you ask?" came the colonel's unmistakable tones, but sounding hollow and uncanny. "I have spared you much on this occasion, but you must go. Disobedience will be bad for you! I shall be watching, unseen and unsuspected. Take warning, and do as I bid. I now depart, and you will hear no more of me, providing you obey my decree. Farewell!"

It was marvellously done. The voice trailed away, and it seemed exactly as though the "ghost" had descended into the very ground at Starke's feet. The voice went lower and lower, and the last word uttered seemed to come from a spot many feet below the surface, muffled and faint. And then dead silence reigned.

There was no doubt that Nicodemus was a consummate artiste, despite his simple looks. His performance had been little short of wonderful, considering that he had had no rehearsal.

And Starke gave two or three gulps, stared round him again, and then wildly ran towards the Ancient House. He had been completely spoofed, and I assured myself that Trotwood's "impersonation" of the colonel had really been necessary. It made the whole thing seem real. Starke wasn't superstitious, as Watson had pointed out, and just an ordinary ghost-voice might not have done the trick.

As it was, Starke blundered through the lobby, tried to pull himself together in the passage, and walked straight to Nelson Lee's

study. He tapped unsteadily on the door, and then entered. The door closed.

"Success!" I murmured triumphantly. "Nick, my son, you're absolutely a wonder! The way you did the thing was worth quids!"

"Yet I will accept nothing for my services; your approval is intensely gratifying to me," beamed Nicodemus. "But, my dear friend, you are giving me credit for something I do not deserve. The idea, I believe, originated in the noble brain of Sir Lancelot Montgomery——"

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie. "We won't argue on the subject, old boys. Starke's gone in to tell his information, an' that's all we need worry about. It's been a rippin' success, an' I only hope Starke's evidence will be worth all the trouble!"

And Starke's evidence was!

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT STARKE KNEW.

NELSON LEE turned in his chair sharply as Starke entered his study. The schoolmaster-detective was reclining before the fire, and a half-smoked cigar was firmly gripped between his teeth. He removed it, and knocked the ash into the fender.

"Well, Starke?" he asked irritably. "I'm afraid I can't attend—— Good gracious! Have you seen a ghost, my boy?"

"Nun-no, sir!" gasped Starke, swallowing hard. "I—I—— That is to say, you—you—— I—I mean, sir——"

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Come, Starke, you must pull yourself together," he said briskly. "What is the matter with you, my boy? You are as white as a sheet, and have evidently suffered from some shock or other."

Starke pulled himself together with an effort.

"I—I suppose it's the effect of that awful affair of last night, sir," he said huskily. "Besides, I—I've just realised that I may be able to help. The fact is, sir, I want to tell you something. I was out last night, and I—I saw—— I was breaking bounds, sir, after midnight——"

"You must tell your story more coherently, Starke," interrupted Nelson Lee gently. "Sit down and calm yourself. There is no immediate hurry; collect your thoughts thoroughly before speaking again."

Starke sat down on the edge of a chair, and felt more comfortable. But he looked round him once or twice in a most uneasy fashion. Nelson Lee appeared to be attending to his cigar, but was actually watching Starke closely. He couldn't quite make out what this visit meant. But he was fairly convinced that Starke was telling the truth—and he had obviously been forced to do so.

"I'm a prefect, sir, and I'd have spoken before, but I was afraid that I should be disgraced," muttered Starke hoarsely. "I—I broke bounds last night, sir, well after midnight, and if you'll promise me that I won't be punished, I'll tell you something——"

"One moment, Starke," interrupted Lee. "I can make no bargain with you of that nature. If you broke bounds last night, in defiance of the school rules, you must be prepared to suffer the consequences. However, if you are able to justify your presence outside the school at such an hour, I may be disposed to regard your slip leniently. But you must make no conditions—and I will accept none. Why did you break bounds?"

"I'd promised to meet somebody, sir, in the village, and he couldn't get there until very late," replied Starke desperately. "I'll tell you all the details if you like, sir, but it's rather private, and I'd rather not."

Nelson Lee smiled rather grimly. He guessed the nature of Starke's "private" business. However, there was just a chance that the prefect would be able to give some vital information concerning the mysterious murder of Colonel Clinton. And Nelson Lee wished to encourage Starke to continue.

"All right, my boy," he said, smiling. "I will not press you for details. For the moment we will overlook the fact that you broke bounds. Tell me what you saw while you were out—for I gather that you did see something?"

"Yes, rather, sir!" said Starke, greatly relieved and far more confident. "When I left my friend in the village it was late——"

"What do you call late?"

"Well, I believe it was nearly two o'clock!" confessed Starke fearfully.

"I should be inclined to call that early, Starke—very early indeed," said Nelson Lee drily. "Dear me! That was a most disgraceful hour for a prefect to be abroad. However, continue your story."

"Yes, sir," said Starke, anxious to get on. "When I was near the school—almost against the corner of the Triangle wall, in fact—I was tremendously startled to meet somebody who was slouching towards me. The light wasn't very good, but the stars were out, and I could see that the chap was a kind of tramp, raggedly dressed, and without a cap. But it was his face and his eyes that startled me most, sir. I've never seen such a wild-looking creature."

"Tell me exactly what you mean, Starke," said Lee, as keen as a razor on this fresh piece of information. "How was the man wild?"

"Well, he seemed like a lunatic, sir," replied Starke, now almost at his ease. "And he was babbling some awful words, sir."

"Profane words, do you mean?"

"No, sir, not that," replied the prefect. "But they were awful in another sense. The chap kept repeating something about a foreign-looking man he had seen a few minutes earlier. The tramp almost grabbed hold of me and babbled that this foreign-looking man was carrying a dead body!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee slowly. "Well, Starke?"

"I was jolly startled, sir."

"No doubt. But what followed?"

"Nothing, sir—only the chap kept repeating that about the dead body and the foreign-looking man," said Starke huskily. "I thought the man was crazy—that he'd

Nelson Lee and Inspector Lenard followed the dog towards the spinney.



2



As Starke crept past the lighted window a shadow appeared on the blind.

escaped from an asylum, or something. Anyhow, he went away after a bit——"

"Which way did he go?"

"Towards the village, sir. I went on and got into the Triangle."

"Was there a light in any of the lower windows?"

"Yes, sir; Colonel Clinton's window was lighted."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Lee sharply. "That is most interesting, Starke. Well, did you see anything else? Did you see any shadow on the colonel's blind?"

"Only once or twice, sir—just somebody passing backwards and forwards."

"Did you recognise the shadow?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Starke. "But I'll swear that it wasn't Dr. Stafford's shadow."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"That won't do, Starke," he said. "If you couldn't recognise the shadow, you can't be certain that it wasn't the Headmaster——"

"But I can, sir," interrupted Starke confidently. "I went straight indoors, and only two minutes afterwards I passed Dr. Stafford's bedroom door. And I heard the Head snoring quite distinctly, sir."

"Would you swear to that, Starke?"

"On my oath, sir!" replied the Sixth Former. "I even paused for a second or two outside the bedroom, and I know that Dr. Stafford was fast asleep. His snore is quite distinctive, sir. Besides, who else would be snoring in the Head's bedroom in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, that is quite a sound argument," nodded Nelson Lee. "But tell me, Starke, why were you passing the Headmaster's bedroom?"

"It—it was a short cut to my own bedroom, sir——"

"Apparently, Starke, you are well acquainted with these short cuts," interrupted Lee grimly. "In consideration of what you have told me, though, I am inclined to let you off. But you will please understand, Starke, that you must never break bounds again. And it will be necessary for you to attend the inquest."

"The—the inquest!" gasped Starke.

"Undoubtedly. Your evidence is of the highest importance, and you must tell the coroner's jury everything you know," said Lee. "And now, Starke, I want you to enlarge upon your statement. Tell me more about the man you met in the lane."

"There's nothing more to say, sir," replied the Sixth Former, quite relieved in mind, and ready enough to talk now. "He looked like a tramp, as I said, and he was shabbily dressed."

"Without a cap—in such cold weather, too?"

"That's right, sir."

"Perhaps he was carrying his cap in his hand?"

"I didn't see it, sir, and I should have done if he had been, because he was gesticulating all the time, and waving his paws about in front of my face."

"Was he bearded?"

"I think so, sir—a kind of straggly, untidy beard," replied Starke. "A regular

tramp, sir. He was just about as tall as I am, I suppose, and walked a bit bow-legged. But that's all I can tell you about him."

"Well, with regard to the shadow you saw on the blind," went on Lee. "What was your impression, Starke? Did the shadow move about quickly, as though the owner of it was hurried in his movements, or was it——"

"That's right, sir," interrupted Starke quickly. "I shouldn't have thought of that if you hadn't reminded me. The shadow kept on dodging about and bending down. But I couldn't possibly say who was in the colonel's study. But it couldn't have been the Head, could it, sir? And if that tramp's story was true, it proves that the Head didn't kill the colonel. Because Clinton must have been murdered outside the school and then carried into the study. And the Head was asleep all the time."

"Your reasoning is quite sound, Starke, and the coroner's jury, I have no doubt, will agree with you," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "You did quite right to come to me with this information, and I only deplore the fact that you delayed so long. You ought to have told me this early this morning."

"Yes, I—I know, sir," muttered Starke humbly. "I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"Well, better late than never, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "If I wish to question you again I will send for you. For the present, you may go."

"Thank you, sir."

Starke lost no time in taking his departure. He was feeling greatly relieved—there was a weight off his mind—and his escapade of the previous night was not to be inquired into. Starke had really visited the White Harp, and had won the sum of thirty-five shillings at poker, but he hadn't thought it necessary to mention this detail to Nelson Lee.

The prefect knew well enough that he would be sacked if the truth became known. But Nelson Lee meant to let the matter drop—and Starke breathed freely once more. But what of that queer incident in the Triangle?

Starke was greatly uneasy, although he had complied with the order that the "ghost" had given. The Sixth-Former was quite certain in his own mind that he had really heard nothing—that it had been a delusion, caused by his own conscience. He resolved, however, to go to the prefects' room, and to remain there with the other fellows until bedtime. The Triangle was to be avoided!

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had not been idle.

Detective-Inspector Lennard was staying at the George Inn, in Bellton. He had been invited to occupy apartments in the Ancient House, but the chief-inspector politely declined, saying that it would be far better for his work to remain in the village. And his work came before all things.

Lee rang him up, and requested him to attend at once. Therefore, half an hour later Nelson Lee was deep in conversation with Sir Rupert Manderley and Detective-Inspector Lennard. They listened with great interest to the evidence which Starke had brought forward.

"Is this information reliable?" asked the inspector doubtfully.

"I must confess that Starke is not exactly a model boy," replied Nelson Lee. "On this occasion, however, he was undoubtedly telling the truth. And it will not be necessary for us to rely solely upon his word, Lennard. There is this other man—this tramp. If we can only find him he will be able to corroborate Starke's evidence in detail. That man must be found."

The inspector grunted.

"Not so easy as it sounds, old man," he said. "The fellow might be in London by this time——"

"On the other hand, it is quite likely that he is no more than five miles distant," interrupted Lee. "Tramps, so far as my experience goes, do not travel any great distance in a period of twenty-four hours. And we must find him, Lennard—it is a matter of the first importance."

"Yes, I agree with you there."

"But, my dear sirs, how can the finding of this tramp help us so materially?" inquired Sir Rupert. "You must excuse me for appearing so dull. But you are experienced in these investigations, while I am but a child in such matters. Is there any chance, do you think, of Dr. Stafford's innocence being proved?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"If we can establish the fact that the colonel's dead body was carried into the College House from outside by somebody other than the Head, it will be quite obvious that Dr. Stafford was in no way connected with the crime," he replied. "Just consider the facts—taking it for granted that Starke was truthful."

"This boy has been in the village very late at night, and he returned somewhere about two o'clock—a most disgraceful hour for a boy to be out, I will admit. On this occasion, however, I am very glad that he was out. He met a man, a tramp, who was obviously unnerved, and who blurted out something concerning a foreigner carrying a dead body. Strikingly significant, considering the events of the night—eh?"

"You're right, Lee," nodded the Chief Inspector. "We shall have to get hold of that witness—if such a person exists. And if Dr. Stafford was asleep and snoring at the time, it stands to reason that the colonel must have been murdered by somebody else, otherwise, who was the man moving about in Clinton's study?"

"The colonel himself, perhaps?" suggested Sir Rupert brilliantly.

"After he had been carried in dead?" smiled Nelson Lee. "No, my dear sir, the man was not the colonel—he was the colonel's murderer. And if we can get hold of this direct witness—who can prove that the dead man was carried from the road into the College House—it will be patent to the lowest intelligence that Dr. Stafford was not connected with the affair."

"Even I can see that!" grinned the inspector.

"Your intelligence is by no means low," went on Nelson Lee, smiling. "I argue this

way, Sir Rupert. If Dr. Stafford actually meant to kill the colonel, would he have chosen a time when Clinton was away from the school? Possibly. But would he have carried the body back? That is the point which is of the most vital importance. It seems fairly obvious to my mind that the murder was committed some distance from St. Frank's, that the body was carried into the colonel's study, and that the evidence was faked up with the deliberate intention of incriminating the Headmaster. The absence of the Headmaster's finger-prints on the poker agrees with that theory. The man who wielded that implement was the murderer—but he was not Dr. Stafford."

"You're right, Lee—and there's more in this affair than we know of," said Detective-Inspector Lennard briskly. "Look here. The best thing I can do is to get my people busy on finding that tramp."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"If we can only get hold of that fellow before the inquest, it will be a splendid stroke," he said. "The inquest is at ten o'clock in the morning, Lennard, as you know—and if the evidence is allowed to go to the jury in its present state, it is almost certain that a verdict of wilful murder will be brought against Dr. Stafford. So we must work with a will."

"By gad!" exclaimed Sir Rupert. "I hope you succeed!"

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRAIL.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH started.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

It was nearly supper-time, and Handforth and Co. had deserted Study D, in order to pay a short visit to the common-room. And as the three inseparable juniors marched down the passage they heard the unmistakable voice of Gulliver in the lobby.

"You little snivelling fathead!" Gulliver was saying. "There's no need to look miserable just because the Head's in gaol!"

"But the Head's innocent!" protested the voice of a fag.

"Rosh!" snapped Gulliver scornfully. "He's guilty—and everybody knows it. He'll end up by being hanged——"

Gulliver broke off as a whirlwind charged into the lobby. It was Handforth, closely followed by Church and McClure.

"Collar him!" bellowed Handforth.

Gulliver was under no delusion concerning who "him" was. Handforth's campaign of nose-punching was famous throughout the Ancient House, and Gulliver was not the fellow to stand up to the aggressive leader of Study D.

He looked round him wildly for some avenue of escape. But there was only the outer door available, and Gulliver decided to flee rather than have his nose punched. It would probably be punched later on, even if he escaped now, but Gulliver believed in putting off the evil hour as long as possible.

He just managed to get the door open in time, and streaked across the dark Triangle at full speed, hoping that Handforth and Co. wouldn't follow.

"After him!" roared Handforth, pelting down the steps. "I'm not going to be done by a rotter like Gulliver! Come on, you chaps!"

Church and McClure were not quite so enthusiastic, and they hung behind. But Handforth pelted away on Gulliver's track, faintly seeing the fleeing junior just ahead of him.

Gulliver made for the school wall, and scrambled over hastily, intending to dodge round by the playing-fields, and to return to the Ancient House. Once in the midst of his friends he would be safe, for he would be supported, and Handforth couldn't fight the lot.

Edward Oswald charged at the wall in his stride, so to speak. And, naturally, he misjudged the distance. And instead of going neatly over, he collided with the brickwork and tumbled head first into the ditch on the other side.

"Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Handforth.

Fortunately, the ditch was very shallow, and only slightly muddy at the bottom. Handforth sat up dazedly, and knew that he had lost his quarry. For there was no sign of Gulliver now, and everything was still.

"All right!" growled Handforth to himself. "He'll only get it worse later on, the frightful cad! I'll knock him flat for this!"

Rather unreasonably, Handforth blamed Gulliver for this catastrophe to himself, and he proceeded to stand up. His hand came in contact with something which felt like cloth. It had been lying almost hidden in the weeds and grass, and Handforth had only felt it by accident.

"Somebody's cap!" he muttered. "Better take it indoors, I suppose—no sense in wasting a good cap."

He climbed painfully over the wall again and made his way across the Triangle very sedately. He was thinking, with much satisfaction, of the particular upper-cut which he would deliver upon Gulliver's jaw in the dormitory. If anybody interfered, they would receive upper-cuts, too. Handforth was quite ready to fight a dozen, if necessary. He didn't think of the possible disaster to himself.

"You giddy traitors!" he exclaimed witheringly.

Church and McClure had suddenly loomed up out of the darkness.

"We've been looking for you, you fat-head!" snapped McClure. "Where the dickens have you been to? And what about Gulliver?"

"Have you left his remains in some dark corner?" asked Church.

Handforth snorted.

"The rotter got away!" he growled. "Jumped over the wall, and I followed him. But I tripped, or something, and came a frightful cropper into the ditch. You'll have to brush me down when we get indoors."

Church and McClure grinned safely in the

darkness. It never worried them to hear that Handforth had met with some minor misfortune. Unless his warlike spirit was curbed occasionally by some such incident, he wouldn't be manageable. And the three juniors entered the Ancient House lobby.

"My hat! I should think you are muddied!" grinned McClure. "It's no good brushing those clothes, Handy——"

"I suppose you think it's funny?" snapped Handforth, glaring.

"No-o, not exactly," stammered Church. "But you do look a bit worn-out, old chap. And what's that dirty thing you've got in your hand?"

"Somebody's cap. I found it in the ditch," explained Handforth. "No sense in leaving it there—— Well, I'm jiggered!"

He broke off abruptly, and stared at the cap in his hand. In the darkness he had believed it to be the property of one of the juniors—it was by no means an uncommon event for school caps to be knocking about in the open. But this article of headgear was a grimy old grey tweed thing, the peak being greasy with age and use. Handforth held it out at arm's length.

"Must have belonged to some tramp or other!" he said disgustedly. "I shall have to go and wash my giddy hands, now—scrub 'em with carbolic, or something. Of all the dirty-looking articles! Chuck it away, Church!"

Church backed out of reach.

"No need for us both to handle it," he said. "You chuck it away, Handy!"

"Who's talking about chucking things away?" I inquired, entering the lobby at that moment. "Don't you know it's wasteful to——"

"My dear chap, you're welcome to this cap!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "No need to throw it away, if you like to wear it. As you're so jolly careful, perhaps you'd better."

Church and McClure chuckled, and I smiled.

"Where did you find that old thing?" I asked. "It wasn't within the school grounds, I'll bet."

Handforth explained, and was just about to go out into the Triangle with his find when I pulled him up.

"Hold on!" I said quickly. "I'll take that cap, Handforth."

"What the dickens for?" he asked, staring.

"Well, you found it just outside the school grounds—in the ditch beside the road," I pointed out. "It wasn't there yesterday. I know, because I was searching for a tennis-ball in that ditch with Montie and Tommy yesterday afternoon. Somebody left it there during the night or to-day. I don't suppose it's of any importance, but it might be."

"What the dickens are you getting at?" demanded Handforth curiously.

"My dear chap, a murder was committed last night," I explained. "The evidence points to the Head—but it wasn't the Head. Somebody else was on the scene last night. And here we find an absolutely strange cap

—just against the school wall. The gov'nor's always told me to look after the details—and this cap may be of importance. On the other hand, it's probably no good at all. But it's best to make sure beforehand."

Handforth regarded me admiringly.

"Well, I should never have thought of that, you know," he said candidly. "You're a jolly cute beggar, Nipper, I must say! But if this cap turns out to be valuable, don't forget that I found it."

"No; and I sha'n't forget that you were going to chuck it away, either!" I grinned, as I took the cap and marched off.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure were greatly amused—until Handforth turned his famous glare upon them. I left the affectionate trio arguing, and hastened to Nelson Lee's study. Just as I was about to tap the door opened and Detective-Inspector Lennard appeared, buttoning his gloves, and with his hat on his head.

"Hallo, Nipper!" he said genially. "Want to speak to your kind master?"

"Yes—and you, too," I replied. "This might interest you, inspector."

I held up the cap for his examination.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "that doesn't interest me at all, young 'un. I suppose you're trying to sell it? I wouldn't give you a ha'penny—"

"Oh, chuck it!" I grinned.

Within two minutes I had explained to Nelson Lee and the chief-inspector how the cap had come into my possession and where it had been found. Sir Rupert Manderley listened with interest, but made no comment.

"Quite decent of you to bring it here, Nipper," said Lennard, "but I don't suppose it's any good to us— Hold on, though!"

"Exactly!" said Nelson Lee calmly. "You've just remembered that Starke's tramp was capless—eh, Lennard? It may be a pure coincidence, but I must say that it looks rather significant."

"Deucedly so!" said the inspector promptly.

"I can't get the hang of it," I put in. "What do you mean by 'Starke's tramp, sir?'"

I was naturally very curious. The little trick in the Triangle had resulted in Starke going to Nelson Lee with his information. Judging by the expressions on the faces of Nelson Lee and Inspector Lennard, that information had been of some importance. Later on, of course, I should explain to the gov'nor that I and my chums had "persuaded" Starke to go forward with his evidence.

"Don't go for a minute, Lennard," said the gov'nor quietly. "Nipper, sit down. I'll just explain to you the situation as it stands now. I shall only be very brief, but it will do for the moment."

Sir Rupert looked rather surprised, but the chief-inspector nodded and smiled. He knew that Nelson Lee almost invariably took me into his confidence on all matters. As the gov'nor himself explained, I might be useful.

And I couldn't possibly be useful if I was left in the dark.

The gov'nor soon told me of Starke's experience during the small hours of the morning—and then I realised how fully justified Nicodemus had been in doing his task thoroughly. I realised, also, that the old tweed cap might be of considerable importance.

"I'll bet it belongs to that tramp, sir. It wasn't there yesterday, so—"

"How do you know it wasn't there yesterday?"

I explained, and Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, Nipper, we have every reason to conclude that this cap is the property of the man we are anxious to get hold of," he said. "Now, there are two ways of attaining our object. One is to set the police scouring the countryside, and the other is to go on a personal search. The former course is doubtful, but the latter seems to promise well."

"I'd like to see how," remarked Lennard.

"We've got no proper description of the man—only a meagre outline, after all—and we might scour the countryside for hours—days—without success."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I have a more direct method, Lennard," he said. "In the kennels here there is a long-haired little spaniel—"

"Boz!" exclaimed the inspector. "By George! I'd forgotten that little beggar—and yet he helped us well on one or two former occasions, didn't he? I begin to see the importance of this cap, Lee. If Boz can only get on the track, it'll be first-rate. But the trail's twenty-four hours old, remember."

"Possibly—indeed, it is close upon twenty hours old at least," agreed Nelson Lee. "But I fancy Boz will be capable of picking it up. The trail has been very little disturbed during the day, on these quiet country roads, and the condition of the road surface is exactly right for retaining the scent. At all events, I think it would be as well to put the matter to the test at once."

"And suppose the dog is successful?"

"Why, we'll follow the trail, even if it takes us all night," said Lee grimly. "You, Nipper, will remain indoors. We can't all go on this expedition, you know. The inspector and I will undertake the task."

I was rather disappointed, but there was nothing else for it. At the same time, I was very pleased to know that things were looking very much better for Dr. Stafford. If only that tramp could be found, and his evidence told at the inquest, it would be almost impossible for the police to detain the Head an hour longer.

Boz was soon fetched from the kennels, and he was intensely eager to go out on the trail. The little spaniel was a most valuable dog, although he certainly didn't look much. It was quite likely that he was a bit of a mongrel, but he had a remarkable scent, and was far better in that respect than a great many bloodhounds. The manner in which he

would pick up a trail and stick to it was simply an eye-opener.

And this proved no exception to the rule.

Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard sallied out just after supper, and Boz was given the old cap to sniff at. If the trail was still sufficiently apparent, the dog would soon be able to find it, for it was known exactly where the cap had been found, and where Starke had met the stranger.

Boz was successful within the first minute. He sniffed eagerly at the ground, ran round in circles, and then trotted off down the road.

"Good!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "He's picked it up, Lennard. The only question is, will he be able to stick to it?"

"Let's hope so," remarked the inspector.

They proceeded down the lane towards the village, Boz maintaining a lead of about six yards, trotting along quite contentedly, but with every nerve on the alert. He had been kept in his kennel for a good few weeks now, except for his daily run, and he was greatly delighted to be out now.

In Bellton the trail was lost, but both Lee and the inspector had been half-prepared for this. Throughout the day there had been a small amount of traffic, but on the other side of the village the trail ought to be as fresh as ever.

Boz was now uneasy and disturbed. He kept dodging about from one side of the road to the other, and occasionally looked back at his master with a woe-begone expression and his ears drooping.

But just at the junction of the Caistowe and the Bannington roads Boz gave a little yelp, and his ears cocked up instantly. The next moment he was trotting along as serenely confident as before. And he chose the Caistowe road.

"I thought we should be able to continue, once we got through the village," said Nelson Lee. "We shall probably experience the same difficulty in Caistowe. And if we can't pick up the scent again at once, we must try all the country lanes in succession."

The detectives pressed on, and Lee's surmise turned out to be correct. For in Caistowe there was no sign of the trail whatever, although Boz had followed it easily enough until the village streets were entered.

The most likely assumption was that the tramp had proceeded through Caistowe by the main road, and Boz was put to this as soon as the little seaside resort had been passed through. And within ten minutes he was going ahead as strongly as ever.

It was now getting on towards midnight, and the whole countryside was dark and deserted. Nelson Lee and the inspector were not tired as yet, but it seemed as though their walk was to be a long one.

"Well, it's all experience," remarked Lennard cheerfully, as he trudged along, filling his pipe. "We shall know what it's like to lead a tramp's life, old man. I can't say I exactly care for it. I'd prefer a motor-car any day."

"None of your grumbles!" chuckled Nelson Lee.

"Come to think of it," went on the inspector, "we were a couple of mugs not to come by car. We could have crawled along behind Boz, and taken it in easy and comfort——"

"You lazy beggar!" interrupted Lee sternly. "Don't you know that this walk will do you a world of good? Exercise is useful."

But even Nelson Lee had quite enough of it that night. The trail led on and on, through hamlets and villages, and it seemed as though it would never end. Hour after hour dragged by, and Boz himself was beginning to get fed-up. But for the fact that he was hot on the trail, he would have given up the job long since.

It was not until the first streaks of dawn were appearing in the sky that success came. And then the wanderers were more miles from St. Frank's than they cared to think about.

The last village had been passed through over half an hour before, and the trackers were now on a lonely stretch of road which ran almost parallel with the coast. There were no houses to be seen in either direction, and a small spinney lay just to their left, off the road.

"We shall find ourselves goodness knows where by breakfast-time," remarked Lennard grumpily. "I'm so stiff that—— Hallo!"

"This looks interesting," said Nelson Lee calmly.

Boz had suddenly left the road, and had climbed through a gap in the hedge—directly towards the spinney. This could only mean one thing. The end of the trail had been reached, and the quarry was now, in all probability, sleeping amongst the trees.

"A cold job, this weather, if he's in here," remarked the chief-inspector, as he prepared to follow Nelson Lee through the gap.

"I've no doubt the fellow has a bundle with him, and these tramps know all the tricks," observed Lee. "They're hardened to it, too, and they can generally find a sheltered spot in almost any wood. But we'd better not talk, old man, or he may take fright. Boz, you stop close to us. Come on, old boy!"

They proceeded through the wood slowly and cautiously, and Boz was the first to discover the wanted man. The little dog dived down into a hollow, and almost at once there came a frightened exclamation in a husky voice.

"Lummy! Wot the—— 'Ere, clear off, you blinkin' mongrel! 'Op it!" came the voice, in a decidedly startled tone.

"It's all right, my friend," called Nelson Lee quickly. "We don't wish to harm you in the least. You needn't worry yourself."

A few seconds later Lee and the inspector were down in the hollow—which was, indeed, quite dry and protected—and a stump of a candle had been lighted. The stranger was a regular "gentleman of the road," and he eyed his visitors with suspicion and uneasiness.

"Wot's the game, mister?" he asked,

looking at Nelson Lee. "Who are you, an' wot d'you mean by comin' 'ere—"

"The fact is, my friend, you may possibly be able to give us some information concerning an incident which occurred near Bellton last night—or, rather, the night before last, since it is now dawn," said Lee quietly. "You needn't be alarmed, for we are by no means hostile."

"I don't know nothin', guv'nor!" gasped the man hoarsely. "I'll bet a quid you're 'tecs, an' I knew I should git into trouble over that bloomin' affair. But it ain't often I git a chance of pocketin' a bit—I don't know nothing', I tell yer. It ain't no good questionin' of me, either. My name's Ned 'Awkins, an' I come from Peckham—"

"Quite so, Mr. Hawkins," interrupted Nelson Lee. "And you must get the idea out of your head that we mean to arrest you. This gentleman is a detective officer, but if you will help us, as we hope, you will be rewarded richly for your services. So don't look so scared."

"Try some of this," invited the inspector cheerily.

He passed his whisky-flask over, and Mr. Hawkins took a swig, and was much comforted. After that a confab took place, and it was fully daylight by the time a move was made.

"We shall just be able to do it," said Nelson Lee, glancing at his watch. "The inquest starts at ten, and it is now just after half-past seven. We've got nearly two hours and a half—and it will necessary to find a railway-station or a motor-car. I don't think we'll walk back."

"I'm sure we sha'n't!" said the inspector feelingly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE INQUEST.

TEN o'clock was just striking when an old-fashioned motor-car pulled up in front of the George Inn, in Bellton High Street. The car disgorged Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, Nelson Lee, and Mr. Ned Hawkins.

"Just comfortably in time," said Nelson Lee cheerfully.

They had had some little difficulty. From the spinney it had been necessary to walk three miles in order to reach a railway-station—motor-cars were out of the question on that lonely part of the coast. And they had been deposited in Bannington, only to find that there was no connection to carry them on to Bellton.

Accordingly, the first available motor-car had been hired. And, while it was being dug out of its grave—as the inspector put it—they found some breakfast, and demolished it. Mr. Hawkins was provided with a clean collar and tie and a shave. He needed all three most urgently.

"I don't 'arf feel nervous, guv'nor," remarked Mr. Hawkins, as he eyed the George Inn uncertainly. "I ain't never attended a inquest afore."

"That's all right," said the inspector. "All

you've got to do is to get on your hind legs and tell the jury what you saw. Simply answer the coroner's questions, and you'll be safe. And stick to the truth all the time. There's a fiver for you, if you earn it."

"Lummy! I'll 'ave a good try!" declared the witness.

"But, remember, that's only kindness on our part," Lennard reminded him. "It's your duty to give your evidence in any case, and you've got to do so. It's quite possible that you won't get a farthing; it all depends. You'll only get it if you stick to the truth. If you try to fake your evidence—even out of kindness for us—you'll find yourself locked up."

Thus warned, Mr. Hawkins was fully resolved to give his evidence in a straightforward fashion, and to relate the truth and nothing but the truth.

The inquest had not yet started, although it was in active preparation. Sergeant Donnell, Starke, and several College House servants, were subpoenaed for the inquest. Dr. Brett was also to be there, in order to give medical evidence. The body was lying at the village mortuary, just across the road. It was really a little outhouse, which had been converted into a mortuary for the time being.

Hawkins hadn't been subpoenaed, for there wasn't time for that. But he was quite ready and willing to tell all that he knew.

There's no need to go into full details. The jury viewed the body, and were not looking very steady after that ordeal. They trooped into the big room at the rear of the inn, pale and almost scared. Their glances, for the most part, were reserved for Dr. Stafford, as he stood between two constables confronting the court. The Head was quite composed, although suffering keenly.

As a commencement, the medical evidence was taken. Dr. Brett, having been sworn, described the condition of the dead man as he had been found early the previous morning.

"There can be no doubt," said Dr. Brett, "that the colonel's death was caused by many violent blows upon the head with some heavy instrument. It is suggested that a poker caused the injuries, but I can only say that the poker must have been wielded with amazing force."

"Were those injuries sufficient to cause death—alone?" inquired the coroner.

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Brett. "I should judge that the first blow caused insensibility, and the other blows were inflicted after the victim had fallen. That probably accounts for the terribly battered condition of the face."

"Have you examined Dr. Stafford?" asked the coroner.

"I have."

"And do you think he is physically capable of having caused the injuries to the deceased?"

"That is a rather difficult question to answer," replied the doctor. "Once the deceased was unconscious, Dr. Stafford could quite easily have inflicted the injuries. A boy could have done so, indeed. But I find it

hard to believe that a powerful man such as Colonel Clinton could have been overpowered by the prisoner."

"Is there no evidence to suggest that the deceased was taken by surprise?"

"None. There are no injuries whatever at the back of the head, and it is thus obvious that all the blows were directed from the front," said the doctor. "I wish to add, also, that it has struck me that a far heavier weapon was used to commit the crime than the poker which was found."

There was more medical evidence, and Nelson Lee gave much of it. But it all centred round the same subject—that Colonel Clinton had been done to death by some heavy weapon.

The next witness was Sergeant Donnell, and he, with much relish, related the details, as far as he knew them, of the quarrel between the Headmaster and Colonel Clinton on the fatal night. Donnell had been engaged as drill-instructor by the colonel, and had been curtly dismissed by Dr. Stafford. His evidence, therefore, was bitter and biased.

Other servants—with marked reluctance—were compelled to testify that a violent quarrel took place. But it was made quite clear, in spite of Sergeant Donnell, that it was the colonel who had started it.

So far the evidence had gone very much against Dr. Stafford, and it seemed quite obvious that he had committed the crime in a frenzy of anger. There was the fact that the blood-stained poker had been found in Dr. Stafford's study, and that one of the Head's slippers, also blood-stained, was picked up in the murdered man's apartment.

And then Nelson Lee was again called, and he told the jury all the facts concerning the poker—that the finger-prints on it were those of a strange hand, and that Dr. Stafford had not touched it. Detective-Inspector Lennard, whose word was of great weight, also testified to this fact, and pointed out that Dr. Stafford had certainly not replaced the poker in his library after the murder was committed. The inspector also suggested the theory that the whole thing was a plot against Dr. Stafford, and intimated that he was in a position to submit evidence which would prove that the crime was committed outside the school property, and that the body was conveyed to the College House afterwards.

There was quite a sensation at this piece of news, and jurymen began to look at one another almost intelligently. Dr. Stafford had lost his expression of despair, and was now listening to the evidence eagerly and anxiously.

Starke was then sworn, and, although he was nervous to begin with, he soon recovered his composure, and told his story carefully and boldly.

"Dr. Stafford was in his bedroom, fast asleep, at two o'clock," declared Starke. "I know that, because I heard the Head—er—snoring."

There were some smiles, and even Dr. Stafford joined in.

"The Head was fast asleep at two o'clock,"

repeated Starke. "And at that very time somebody was downstairs, in Colonel Clinton's study. I can't say who that somebody was, because I only saw a shadow; but it wasn't the Headmaster. And I don't think the jury will be willing to agree that Dr. Stafford would calmly go to sleep immediately after killing a man."

"Perhaps not," said the coroner; "but you must not depart from your evidence to express opinions, my boy. And you must remember that you are speaking on oath. Do you swear that you heard Dr. Stafford snoring in his bedroom at two o'clock?"

"Yes—I positively swear it," said Starke steadily.

"You could not have mistaken somebody else's snore?"

"No, of course not. Besides, who else would be snoring in the Head's bedroom?" said the witness. "It was Dr. Stafford, and nobody else."

"The court must rely solely upon your sense of hearing with regard to this point?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"You saw nothing?"

"Hang it all, I couldn't open the Head's door and look into his bedroom!" replied Starke, somewhat irritably. "I heard him asleep, and that's all I can say. I went on to my bedroom, and was soon asleep myself."

"You heard no sounds from outside?"

"No, none."

Starke's evidence was soon finished, but it had made an impression. Everybody in the court was beginning to suspect that the Headmaster was the victim of a plot, and that he had not been in any way connected with the murder. It had already been pointed out by Nelson Lee that the presence of a blood-stained handkerchief and one of the Head's slippers in the dead man's study meant little or nothing. On the face of it, the evidence seemed conclusive, but Nelson Lee soon disposed of it.

The handkerchief could easily have been secured from the Head's study—from the pocket of an old coat—and the slipper certainly had been secured from the study. The same applied to the poker. All this had happened after the Head had retired for the night and while everybody was asleep.

It was for the jury to decide whether the evidence pointed to the fact that Dr. Stafford himself had left those incriminating articles in Colonel Clinton's study, or whether they had been deliberately placed there. Either view could be accepted, but the latter was by far the most probable.

So, with Starke's evidence on the top of the other, the jury was gradually becoming convinced that the murder was not the straightforward affair it had seemed at first glance. And then came the turn of Mr. Ned Hawkins.

Having been sworn, the shabby-looking witness prepared to face the ordeal before him. The jury regarded him uncertainly, and the coroner did so with interest. But he had been produced by no less a person than Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, and so it was obvious that his testimony would be of im-

portance. Moreover, Starke had already intimated that such a witness was available.

"You have heard the story of this murder?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, tell the court what you know."

"That's easy," said Mr. Hawkins. "The night afore last I was fairly on me hoppers—without the price of a drink in me pocket. My idea was to git to Caistowe afore the mornin'—me knowin' a pal—"

"Quite so," interrupted the coroner. "But you must confine yourself to the matter in hand, my man. I understand that you passed St. Frank's College in the early hours of the morning?"

"Yus, that's right, sir," said the witness, nodding. "An' a rare fright I got, too. I didn't know the place was a school at that time, an' I was trudging along, feelin' a bit lonesome-like. A feller ain't exactly 'appy when 'is stummick ain't bin filled for over forty-eight hours. Mind, I'd 'ad a few scraps, 'ere an' there, but not wot you might call a square meal."

"What did you see near the school?" asked the coroner pointedly.

"Well, it was this 'ere way, sir," said Mr. Hawkins. "Jest as I was walkin' past the 'igh wall. I seed somethink movin'. An' then I stood stock still, reg'lar scared out o' my wits. For there, jest again the wall, was a man with somethink on 'is back."

"Did you see what the something was?"

"Yus, I did, sir."

"Tell the court what you saw."

"It was the dead body of another man," said the witness impressively. "Mind, I ain't tellin' no lies—it's the truth, as sure as I'm standin' 'ere! That bloke was carryin' a bloomin' corpse!"

There was quite a big sensation in the court now.

"You are positive that the man was dead?"

"Any man with 'is face busted-in like that poor chap's was would be dead," declared the other huskily. "It fair give me a turn, I can tell yer."

"You have viewed the body?" asked the coroner sharply.

"Yus, sir!"

"And you identify it as the body you saw outside the school property?"

"It's the same, an' I'll swear that fifty times if you want me to," declared Mr. Hawkins. "Well, as soon as the bloke spotted me starin' at 'im, 'e dropped the other poor chap an' reg'lar gasped. Then 'e come up to me an' stared into my face."

"Can you describe this man?"

"Not very well, sir. It was dark, pretty nigh, an' all I can say is that 'e was a furrin'-lookin' cove, with a big black beard an' bushy eyebrows. 'Is eyes fair shone at me, an' 'e was tremblin' all over. 'You've seen nothin', my friend. Understand?' 'e sez. 'None o' your games,' I sez. 'I've seen that feller wot's now lyin' on the ground. 'E's a dead man,' I sez, 'an' you can't kid me, mister.' Well, the furriner grabbed 'old o' my shoulders, an' then shoved a pile o' loose money into my fist. 'Take that,' 'e sez. 'Clear out o' this district, an' 'old your

tongue. This affair ain't no concern o' yours, so forgit it. There's five quid there, an' you oughter think yourself lucky.' Well, I took the money dazed-like, an' walked away."

"Did this man speak in pure English?"

"No, sir—'e 'ad a kind o' furrin accent," replied the witness. "An' 'e stood in the middle o' the road, watchin' me, until I'd turned the bend. I 'ad 'arf a mind to go back, 'cos I'd left me cap agin the ditch, 'avin' dropped it there in my fust fright. But the thought o' that dead man unnerved me proper. An' I walked on, an' met another bloke."

"Who was he?"

"That young feller sittin' over there," said Mr. Hawkins, indicating Starke. "I was fair off me 'ead that night, an' I believe I was 'arf dotty. Any'ow, I told that there young feller wot I'd seen, only disjointed-like, an' didn't realise that I'd bin blabbin' until I'd collected me thoughts."

"Why didn't you inform the police of what you had seen?"

Mr. Hawkins scratched his head.

"It sounds easy, sir, but I ain't like one o' you gents," he replied. "Supposin' I'd gorn to the cops? Like as not they would 'ave jugged me! I reckoned my best plan was to lie low an' say nothin'—an' that five quid was 'andy, too. Mebbe I was wrong—but I've told the truth. An' I reckoned that the perlice would git busy on the job without me buttin' in. But if I can be of any 'elp, I'm only too willin'."

"Did you see which direction the man with the body came from?"

"No, sir. I come acrost 'im sudden, an' I s'pose 'e was crouchin' agin the wall, tryin' to 'ide 'isself until I'd got by. An' I was so scared that I wasn't rightly responsible for wot I did. I was mortally afraid o' bein' look up for 'avin' somethin' to do with the murder. That's why I never went to the perlice. I come acrost the affair by accident, an' thought I'd best forgit it, as the furrin bloke told me."

The tramp's evidence was soon concluded, and then one or two minor witnesses were called, and the coroner addressed the jury.

He re-told the evidence in brief, and asked the jury to consider their verdict carefully and thoroughly. He pointed out that the evidence was of a rather conflicting character, and he realised that the jury had a somewhat difficult task. It was not for him to give a hint in either direction.

A hush fell upon the court, and only the whispering of jurymen could be heard. They consulted together at some length. Meanwhile, the spectators were looking from the jury to the accused man. Dr. Stafford was sitting straight and upright, as though positively confident of being acquitted. There was not the slightest sign of guilt or fear upon his lined, kindly face.

The foreman at last announced that the jury had agreed, and the coroner put the formal inquiry.

"We find," said the foreman, amidst a tense hush, "that the deceased met his death by being heavily battered about the head by some blunt instrument, which might, or

might not, have been a poker. Furthermore, we find that the accused man, Dr. Stafford, is entirely innocent of the charge brought against him. The crime was committed by some person or persons unknown."

"Splendid!" whispered Nelson Lee into Lennard's ear.

The coroner nodded.

"That is a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," he said quietly, and entered it into his notes accordingly.

The Court rose, amid great excitement. Dr. Malcolm Stafford, the Headmaster of St. Frank's, had been found innocent by the coroner's jury. Of course, the verdict of a coroner's jury was not of much concern, and it was wondered whether the police would allow Dr. Stafford to go immediately, or whether there would be a host of formalities.

Owing to Detective-Inspector Lennard's presence, however, the Head left the George Inn a free man—entirely cleared of all suspicion and without a stain upon his character.

It was undoubtedly a splendid triumph for Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER VII.

WHO KILLED THE COLONEL?

"WELL, guv'nor?" I asked breathlessly.

I was standing just outside the George Inn, and addressed Nelson Lee eagerly as he emerged from the old porch. Morning lessons were over, and I had cycled down to hear the verdict. A crowd of other fellows were waiting on the other side of the road.

"I thought you would be here, Nipper," smiled the guv'nor. "Our efforts, I am glad to say, have been quite satisfactory. Dr. Stafford has been cleared of suspicion, and he is now as free as you or I."

"Oh, thank goodness!" I gasped fervently.

And, without waiting for another word, I dashed across the road to where Montie and Tommy were waiting. Handforth and Co., and Pitt and De Valerie and Grey—a whole crowd of chaps, in fact—were there, too.

"It's all right, my sons!" I exclaimed joyfully. "The Head's 'Not Guilty,' and everything's all serene."

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth.

"Oh, begad!" said Sir Montie. "What ripplin' news!"

"No cheering here, mind," I went on quickly. "We'll buzz back to the school and prepare a rousing reception for the Head. We'll let him see that we've been staunch all the time!"

"Rather!"

"Good old Dr. Stafford!"

"And don't forget that we've got to thank Mr. Lee!" said Reginald Pitt calmly. "If Mr. Lee hadn't worked like a trooper, the Head would have been found guilty by those 'twelve good men and true'!"

"Twelve fatheads, you mean!" sniffed Handforth. "There's never any telling what these rural juries will do. Still, the Head's

free, and it's time for rejoicing. You see, I was right all along!"

We grinned, and mounted our bicycles. A moment later the whole crowd of us were pedalling away at full speed towards St. Frank's.

"Your guv'nor was out all night, wasn't he?" asked Jack Grey, who cycled next to me.

"Yes, I think so—looking for that chap Hawkins," I replied. "The guv'nor and Mr. Lennard must have had a fearful walk—but they got their man. Hawkins's evidence turned the scale, I believe."

I was feeling extremely elated. Nelson Lee had done much, but I couldn't refrain from giving myself just a little pat on the back for the share Study C had taken in the game.

If we hadn't got Nicodemus to play that trick on Starke, Nelson Lee would have known nothing about Hawkins, and Starke himself would not have given his evidence. So the affair would have gone against Dr. Stafford absolutely.

As we neared St. Frank's we met other fellows on their way down, and the news was imparted to them with much joy. And when we finally entered the Triangle a considerable crowd was waiting there.

Within five minutes every living person within St. Frank's knew the truth, and there were many outbursts of enthusiastic cheering. The fags let themselves go thoroughly, and the seniors even so far forgot themselves as to send up a cheer. Their dignity counted for nothing at such a moment.

The gloom which had settled over the old school was lifted on the instant, and the tragedy of Colonel Clinton's death was almost forgotten for the time being. The very thought that the Head might be sent for trial on a charge of wilful murder had cast a black cloud over St. Frank's.

Relief was expressed everywhere. The masters were immeasurably delighted, and breathed freely once more. But everybody recognised that Nelson Lee's efforts were mainly responsible for the change.

It was just upon dinner-time when Handforth came rushing into the lobby. He was obviously excited, and his arms were waving.

"Come on out, you chaps!" he roared.

"Rats!" said Pitt. "It's nearly dinner-time."

"Blow dinner!" bellowed Handforth. "Mr. Lee's coming up the road——"

"Oh, good!"

"And the Head's with him——"

"Hurrah!"

There was a quick rush, and Handforth was swept aside ruthlessly. This was rather unkind, considering that he had brought the news. By the time the crowded lobby had cleared, Handforth was dazedly wondering how many earthquakes had happened. He had been pushed against the wall, his cap was over his eyes, and practically all the breath had been knocked out of him.

"Oh, my goodness!" he gasped. "The—the awful rotters!"

He staggered to his feet and rushed out into

the Triangle with the full intention of exacting instant reprisals. But before he could carry out his warlike intentions, Nelson Lee and Dr. Stafford turned in at the gateway. They found the Triangle literally packed with excited, enthusiastic juniors and a sprinkling of seniors.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Head mildly.

"Welcome back to St. Frank's, sir!" I shouted.

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Dr. Stafford!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers were given with a will, although they were rather more subdued than usual. No fellow absolutely let himself go, but cheered in a restrained kind of way. But there was a world of affection in those cheers.

At last the commotion subsided—and then broke out again when Sir Montie called for cheers for Nelson Lee.

"Hurrah!"

Again and again the old Triangle resounded, and I noticed that several masters were at the windows, and that quite a number of servants were looking on—and cheering, too. It was indeed a moment of joy for Dr. Stafford. And Nelson Lee was by no means unconscious of the honour.

"Boys, I scarcely know what to say in reply to this demonstration!" exclaimed the Head, with moist eyes. "It has given me courage and strength to know that you all believed in my innocence when the position was at its blackest."

"Rather, sir!"

"We knew you were innocent, sir, all the time."

"Hear, hear!"

"But you must not overlook the fact," went on the Head, "that my peril would have been very grave indeed but for the wonderful assistance of Mr. Nelson Lee. He succeeded in——"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

The demonstration went on, and it was quite impossible for the Head to say anything further. So he and the gov'nor fled indoors with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances—considering that they were surrounded and followed by a shouting crowd.

The dinner-bell went just in time to put a stop to the excitement. Everybody was glad that there were to be no lessons in the afternoon—it was a half-holiday. The fellows would be able to do justice to their feelings.

But after dinner I thought it just as well to have a word with Nelson Lee—because I wanted to ask him for details concerning his adventures of the night; and I wanted to know all about the inquest, too.

The gov'nor was in his study, but he wasn't looking quite so delighted as I'd expected to

find him. There was a very thoughtful expression on his face as he stood before the fire, smoking a cigarette.

"Jolly fine, gov'nor!" I exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Quite so, Nipper—as far as it goes," he replied shortly.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, Nipper, that we have only progressed a very short distance in the investigation," said Nelson Lee quietly. "If you will sit down, I will just tell you what evidence was given at the inquest, and any other details you are anxious to hear. I believe you are interested?"

"Oh, rather, sir!"

The gov'nor soon told me all that had passed, and I nodded approvingly when his story was at an end.

"Jolly fine, sir!" I said, again. "Why, things couldn't be better. What do you mean by saying that we've only progressed a short distance?"

Lee tossed his cigarette-end into the fire.

"My dear Nipper, so far my efforts have been crowned with success," he said slowly. "It is only fair to acknowledge that you played quite an important part. The Headmaster is back at St. Frank's, cleared from suspicion, and with his fair name as highly honoured as ever."

"Isn't that something to shout about, sir?" I asked.

"Undoubtedly," agreed the gov'nor. "But what of the rest? Who is responsible for the murder of Colonel Clinton? Who committed the foul crime?"

I scratched my head.

"That's a twister, sir," I confessed.

"We have established the fact that Dr. Stafford is innocent; but we have only added to the mystery," said Nelson Lee calmly. "That is the position, Nipper. According to Hawkins's evidence, a foreigner is the culprit—but I do not readily accept that view."

I stared.

"You think that Hawkins was lying, sir?" I asked.

"By no means; but I think that the murderer deliberately assumed an accent with the object of hoodwinking the tramp," said Lee grimly. "We shall see—and I shall not let the grass grow under my feet."

I regarded the gov'nor narrowly.

"You know something, sir!" I declared.

"Do I, Nipper?" he smiled. "Well, perhaps so. I have, at least, formed a theory, and I am highly suspicious in a certain direction."

"What's the theory, sir?"

"Ah! You'll have to be patient, young'un!" said the gov'nor, shaking his head. "I will promise you that the end will soon come now—but for the moment I can say no more."

And with that I had to be satisfied.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

OUR POPULAR SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**The First Chapters.**BASIL HOOD** is a new boy at Littleminster School.

On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Challis takes Hood fishing in a punt, which gets cast adrift. Later on Grainger, the Captain, sees Challis at the nets, and asks him to play for the next sixteen against the eleven. Meanwhile Basil suspects Myers of casting the punt adrift, since he found a coin belonging to him near the spot. Unsuspectingly he puts the coin in a drawer in his cubicle. It vanishes, and Basil suspects Myers. Challis plays a splendid innings for the school against Ragley. After the match Myers is seen talking to a lout named Joe Smart. Next afternoon Challis and Grainger go for a country walk. They have a fight with Joe and his father, and the two scoundrels are soundly thrashed. The two boys return to the school.

(Now read on.)

Myers's Guilt.

GRAINGER and Challis ascended the stairs together, while the master made his way thoughtfully to Myers's study.

"Will you come in and have a cup of tea and a chat, Grainger?" asked John, as he held the door-handle in his strong fingers.

"Don't mind if I do. I feel as if tea would be refreshing after that set-to—"

Challis opened the door, and they passed into the study together.

But no sooner had Challis crossed the threshold than he halted, with a cry of surprise, for he saw the figure of a boy seated in his armchair, with his body bent forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and his face buried in his hands.

The boy did not look up, didn't hear the door open. They could hear him breathing deeply, and his distress was obvious to them both.

"It's Myers!" cried Challis, starting forward.

Myers raised his head. As he saw them he sprang erect.

"I've been waiting for you, John Challis," he cried, with a trace of the old sneer on his trembling lips. "My luck's dead out. I suppose you're glad to see me like this? I'm not going to fawn to you; but I wish I

were dead, that's all! I wish I were dead!"

There was a rush of feet on the stairs outside and Ponsonby hurtled into the room.

"Either of you chaps seen Myers?" he inquired. "Mr. Evans is asking after him." And then he stopped suddenly and emitted a low whistle, for he recognised the other boy. "What's up?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Oh, Myers wants to talk to Challis," cried the school captain, backing towards the door. "We've got a lot to clear up. May as well stay." He turned fiercely on Myers. "Now," he went on, "perhaps you'll explain why you stood by and allowed that cad Smart to half kill young Basil Hood?"

Myers started back, moistened his lips, and tried to utter a fierce denial.

"It's no good! We've just been to Smart's cottage," said Grainger. "Challis thrashed the hound! He owned up. Denial is useless, Myers."

The boy dropped again into the armchair.

"It means ruin for me! He'll go to Dr. Mason," he growled. "I shall be expelled—"

"And it'll be a jolly good job for the school, Grainger," said Ponsonby fiercely. "I suppose you've been wondering, like most of the others, what hold that blackmailing scoundrel has over Myers? I know."

He felt in his pocket, pulled out the coin that Basil had found on the river bank, and held it out for Myers to see.

"This belongs to you, I believe?" he cried. Myers stammered helplessly.

"Yes, it's mine," he faltered. "I lost it weeks ago."

"Ponsonby, what's the meaning of this?" demanded the Littleminster captain.

"Oh, you remember the accident to John Challis, when that punt got adrift and young Hood was nearly drowned?" said Ponsonby, pumping the words out with difficulty, owing to his indignation. "Well, that cad let the painter loose. It was no accident. He deliberately sent them hurtling down the river; and if it hadn't been for Challis's pluck, they'd both have gone over the weir."

Challis turned and gazed at Myers. Guilt was written on his face. Had he denied the accusation ever so strenuously he would not have been believed.

"So," said John dreamily, "that was it, eh? I knew the punt could never have got

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

adrift of its own accord. And"—he stepped up to Myers, clutched him by the shoulder, bent to hiss the words into his ear—"is that why Smart is blackmailing you, Myers? Is it? Speak up! Better break with him, at any rate, even if it's by telling the truth."

Myers raised his head.

"Yes," he muttered feebly. "That's it. He was there. He saw me do it. But, Challis, for Heaven's sake don't be too hard on me. I only meant it as a joke. I never intended you any harm. I swear I didn't. I wouldn't have done it if I'd guessed how it would end."

Challis thought of the swollen state of the river, remembered the difficulty he had had to urge the punt up against the flood-tide. Every boy in Littleminster was aware how dangerous the Awle was after heavy rain.

Myers was no junior boy. He was alive to the history and tradition of that dangerous stream. The senior's excuses only made matters worse. Challis turned solemnly away.

Grainger hesitated for a moment, then, pointing to the door, cried:

"You'd better go, Myers. The Head will have to know. Take my advice, and tell him the whole truth yourself."

Myers staggered to his feet and faced them, with a ghastly smile on his pale and worried face.

"I dare not. Keep my secret, Grainger, for pity's sake! Let me stay on here. I'll make it up to Challis. I'll make it up to young Hood, I swear I will. And I'll have a chance now that Challis has thrashed that. Give me a chance! Give me a chance!"

"I don't want to speak to a chap who'd blow a bully like Smart to nearly kill a fine youngster like Hood," answered the captain. "Get out!"

Myers saw that it would be useless to plead more, and, with hanging head, slunk out of the room.

"I suppose, Ponsonby, that Basil Hood knew of this?" said Grainger, when the door closed.

"Yes, Grainger."

"Poor little chap! And he didn't sneak. Challis, I think the school ought to know that you were not responsible for that affair on the river."

"Please don't say a word about it, Grainger," cried John, looking troubled. "I don't bear any malice. I don't think we ought to be too hard on Myers. You see, he didn't like me, and—"

"Turned the entire school against you. He's been your enemy through and through, Challis. I'm afraid you will have to leave the matter in my hands."

Grainger had no heart for tea now. He drew his arm through Ponsonby's.

"Come with me, old fellow," he said. "Challis will want to get on with his work."

"I have something to say to you."

Challis protested, and declared that he would have tea ready in a jiffy, but they wouldn't listen to him.

A minute later Challis was alone. He walked slowly to the window and looked out into the grounds below.

He felt sorry for Myers, although he thoroughly disliked his enemy. John would have interceded for him if he could, even thought of doing so; but as his eyes wandered over the ground below he saw an open cab drive up and recognised the fellow who was seated in it.

It was Joe Smart, with a shade over one eye and plaster on his cheek. And the cab drove straight to the doctor's house.

"Phew!" whistled Challis. "The boulder's lost no time. Now the fat will be in the fire, indeed!"

IN WHICH THE HEAD REVIVES AN OLD QUESTION.

CHALLIS, turning away from the window, went to his chair, sat down, and waited.

Slowly the minutes passed away until tea had gone, fifteen, thirty, and still he had not received a summons to visit the Head.

What did it mean? Had Dr. Mason refused to admit the blackmailer and sent Joe Smart back to the town?

John's hopes began to rise. If such were the case, so much the better. Myers might even escape expulsion.

The boy, who at first could not think of studying, took down a book, and, being in an easier frame of mind, began to read. Not for long, though, for the sound of footsteps echoed in the corridor, the door was opened, and Grainger looked solemnly in.

"Challis," he said, "Dr. Mason has sent for us both. He's waiting. It's about the Smart affair, I should say. I think we'll go over together."

John, rising, threw his book down.

"Smart is with the Head now," he said.

"Phew! You don't say so! Oh, well, we'll put a brave face on the trouble, Challis, and, after all, that fight was worth any punishment he may inflict on us. He won't send us down."

They descended the stairs and made their way to the doctor's house in silence. A knock at the Head's study door, and a curt summons to enter brought them across the threshold, and, as both looked round, they saw that Myers was there, Mr. Evans, too, and Joe Smart, the latter standing with his back to the empty fire-grate, with a grin of surly defiance on his face.

Dr. Mason was sitting at his desk. He gave the two boys a searching glance as they entered.

"This fellow tells me that you and Challis brutally assaulted him, Grainger," said the doctor, without preface. "Is it true?"

"Yes, sir," was the prompt reply.

"You left the school, deliberately made your way to his cottage, forced your way in, and thrashed him. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

"H'm! It's very extraordinary behaviour. Positively disgraceful, in fact. I could understand Challis doing it. But that you, the

(Continued overleaf.)

captain of the school, should so demean ourself as to—er— Why did you do it, Grainger?"

The school captain glanced at Challis, and John glanced back.

Then Challis advanced a step.

"May I explain, sir," he said. "I think I know more about it than Grainger does."

"Very well. Proceed."

John Challis, speaking quietly but firmly, at once plunged into his story, omitting nothing. Only when he mentioned young Basil's name and told how ill the boy had been when he found him lying senseless in his room the night before did he betray any emotion.

Dr. Mason, listening in silence, with his eyes fixed on Challis's face, frowned when John repeated the interview he had had with the youngster, when Basil blurted out the truth.

"I see," he cried, when the story was told. "And you and Grainger went to Smart's to demand the truth from him?"

"Yes."

"H'm! And it was owing to his attitude that you attacked him? Would you have thrashed him if he had apologised and humbled himself, might I ask, Challis?"

"I'm afraid I should, sir," answered John, a hot spot showing on both his cheeks. "I couldn't have kept my hands off the bullying brute. You see, I'd seen Basil Hood, and—"

The Head waved him back.

"That will do," he cried. "I suppose you agree to the substance of Challis's story, Grainger?"

"Yes, sir. Challis has spoken the truth, without exaggeration."

"Or excuse," said Dr. Mason, frowning.

"Well, gentlemen, I am satisfied. And this fellow has come to me with a whining accusation directed against Myers. Do you know, Challis, why it was your punt got adrift on the Awle?"

"Yes, sir."

Again the doctor frowned, gazing hard at Myers, whose hangdog expression told how humiliated he felt.

"Myers has confessed everything," he cried.

"He has been guilty of conduct that renders

him unfit to associate with the boys of my school. He is leaving Littleminster to-morrow morning. I have already written and telegraphed to his father. Myers—you can go."

The boy turned away like a whipped cur.

"Yes, sir," he muttered, and without a glance at any of them he left the room.

"As for the blackmailer," cried Dr. Mason, when Myers had gone, "his sphere of usefulness is shattered. I will not place the matter in the hands of the police, for young Hood is progressing splendidly, and I do not want a public scandal to be aimed against my school. But there are other ways of dealing with a scoundrel of this kind."

Smart started and stepped forward, his one eye rolling at the door.

"Wot do yer mean?" he cried. "Look ere, don't you come any of your tricks with me!"

"Grainger," cried the doctor, turning up the cuff of his right sleeve, "you are the strongest here. Hoist him up! Challis, Mr. Evans, I shall be obliged if you will help."

In a flash they saw the doctor's drift, and seizing the struggling and shouting bully tamed him quickly.

Grainger, grasping his wrists as in a vice, got him on to his back and held him there while Challis and Mr. Evans fixed him by the ankles.

Dr. Mason then seized a supple switch which he reserved for special occasions, and which he had not had an opportunity of using for many a long day. His lips were curved in a grim smile. His eyes danced with appreciative delight.

Standing back, and bracing himself neatly, he made the switch whistle through the air, and the thud that followed was when it descended with unerring aim and scientific applied force on the stoutest portion of John Smart's anatomy.

For five long minutes the switch whistled through the air, and the echoing cuts made a grand music, while smothered cries, cringing curses, howls for mercy, cringing whines, and uncouth blubbering penetrated even to the remotest of the schoolrooms, where the boys, ceasing their labours, listened in awe-stricken silence.

(To be concluded.)

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